

25th ANNIVERSARY YEAR

interzone

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FEELINGS OF THE FLESH

DOUGLAS ELLIOTT COHEN



ACK-ACK MACAQUE

GARETH LYN POWELL



A HANDFUL OF PEARLS

BETH BERNOBICH



DADA JIHAD

WILL McINTOSH



THE ALGORITHM

TIM AKERS



CHARLES STROSS

INTERVIEWED



BOOK & FILM REVIEWS

NICK LOWE

JOHN CLUTE

& OTHERS



NEWS & VIEWS

DAVID LANGFORD

25 YEARS OF INTERZONE



ORIGINAL ART

OSVALDO GONZALEZ

SMS

WARWICK FRASER-COOMBE

CHRIS NURSE

JESSE SPEAK



& MUCH MORE

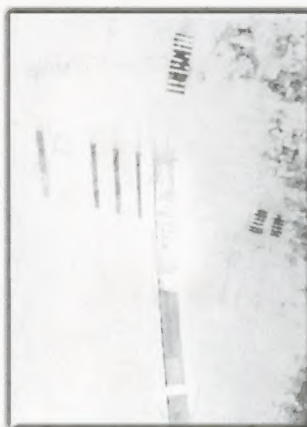
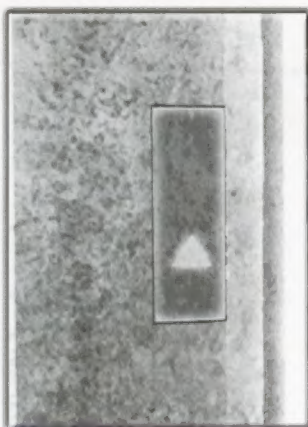


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COMING SOON...

The Far Horizon



a novella by **Jason Stoddard**
illustrated by **Paul Drummond**

The Men in the Attic
John Phillip Olsen

illustrated by David Gentry



The Scent of Their Arrival
Mercurio D. Rivera

illustrated by Paul Drummond



The Best of Your Life
Jason Stoddard

illustrated by Warwick Fraser-Coombe



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LIGHT IN THE DARK
OSVALDO GONZALEZ

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illustrator: Warwick
Fraser-Coombe

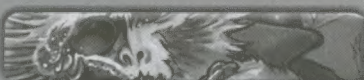


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ACK-ACK MACAQUE

GARETH LYN POWELL

illustrator: SMS

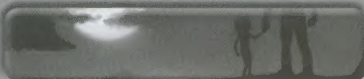


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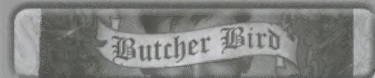
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PAUL S. JENKINS'S REGULAR
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WHAT THE HELL ARE BOOK REVIEWS GOOD FOR ANYWAY?

There's a question that's been asked far and wide in the last few years, in print and on the internet – and, as far as I can tell, has yet to be settled to everyone's satisfaction.

So, as I prepare to take over from the wonderful Sandy Auden as *Interzone's* book reviews editor, what am I looking for in the content I deliver for the magazine? To answer that, I'm going to shamelessly paraphrase Paul Kincaid, one of the team of superb writers I have inherited:

A book review should be honest, defensible, and well written.

Those properties overlap and interlink, of course – especially honesty and defensibility.

There's an argument that says all fiction is a dialogue between the writer and the reader. I think we can extrapolate to say that science fiction – as a body of work – is a dialogue between authors and fans, but also between authors and authors, and between fans and fans. Neither group can survive without the other. So where do reviewers fit into the picture? To the side, perhaps? Squeezed into the middle? I believe they're scattered throughout the mass: some reviewers are authors; some are fans; some are both. Science fiction has always thrived on the discourse produced.

With fiction, as with all art, one person's meat is another person's poison. That applies to reviewers, too – because they are readers first. But they are *writing for readers* – readers like you, readers whom I believe are smart and informed and passionate enough about their reading to treat a book review as what it is: one person's informed and reasoned opinion.

That's why we don't mark books out of five. That's why we don't regurgitate plot synopses and press releases. We believe you desire – and deserve – better than that. And that the books, and the genre that nurtures them, deserve it too. And I'm looking forward to continuing the *Interzone* tradition of delivering intelligent and critical reviews. But I'd like you to drop into the website forum (tappress.com/forum) to tell us how you think we're doing – after all, it's your magazine too. **Paul Raven**

PS: printing this issue in black and white was literally a last-minute decision. We'd much rather print in colour, so hopefully this change is just temporary



A CRUMBLING RUIN, AND HARLECH CASTLE

Did You Notice? '...science fiction, the genre that lit the way for a nervous mankind as it crept through the shadows of the 20th century, has suddenly and entirely ceased to matter.' (*Discover*, July)

J.G. Ballard featured in the *Popbitch* celeb-gossip mailing for '...*The Drowned World*, a fictional account of a flooded London, "a garbage filled swamp". This week London has been under flood alert, with the water full of with [*sic*] human sewage and bacteria. / Coincidentally, Ballard's own street in Shepperton is under threat...' Our author remained high and dry.

SF Science Masterclass. 'As Breeders Test DNA, Dogs Become Guinea Pigs.' (*New York Times*, June)

Hugo Gernsback (1884–1967) was more of a prophet than we suspected. His (ghosted?) autobiography, *Hugo Gernsback: A Man Well Ahead of His Time*, anticipates trends ten years after his death: 'Today's eight-year old, with his black plastic *Darth Vader Starwars* style helmet and his *Light Saber*...' It seems that editor/publisher Larry Steckler helpfully inserted that bit.

J.K. Rowling mania even infected virus

writers. The 'Hairy-A' worm spread via tainted USB memory drives, tempting the unwary with the document *HarryPotter-TheDeathlyHallows.doc* – containing only the phrase 'Harry Potter is dead'.

AWARDS MISCELLANY

Campbell Memorial: Ben Bova, *Titan*.

Cordwainer Smith Rediscovery: Daniel F. Galouye.

International Horror Guild Living

Legend: Ramsey Campbell.

Mythopoeic (fantasy). **Adult fiction:**

Patricia A. McKillip, *Solstice Wood*.

Children's fiction: Catherine Fisher,

Corbenic. **Scholarship/Inklings:** Christina

Scull and Wayne G. Hammond, *The*

J.R.R. Tolkien Companion and Guide.

Scholarship/Other: G. Ronald Murphy, SJ, *Gemstone of Paradise: The Holy Grail in Wolfram's Parzival*.

Sidewise (alternate history). **Long:** Charles Stross, *The Family Trade*, *The Hidden*

Family, and *The Clan Corporate* ('Merchant

Princes' series 1–3). **Short:** Gardner

Dozois, 'Counterfactual' (*F&SF* 6/06).

Sturgeon (short story): Robert Charles Wilson, 'The Cartesian Theater'

(*Futureshocks*).

Salman Rushdie was knighted in the Queen's Birthday honours. Some easily outraged pundits made predictable noises of outrage.

Squidnight's Children. Margaret Atwood's favourite sf theme returns in *Umbrella Academy*, a comic scripted by rock singer Gerard Way: 'Basically, it starts off with a wrestler. And the wrestler, he knocks out this space squid. And when he does that – and it's completely a matter of coincidence – extraordinary children are born, on Earth, instantly.' (*Entertainment Weekly*, June)

Clive James strayed away from his topic of J.K. Rowling Envy: 'I still haven't forgiven C.S. Lewis for going on all those long walks with J.R.R. Tolkien and failing to strangle him, thus to save us from hundreds of pages dripping with the wizardly wisdom of Gandalf and from the kind of movie in which Orlando Bloom defiantly flexes his delicate jaw at thousands of computer-generated orcs. / In fact it would have been even better if C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien

could have strangled each other, so that we could also have been saved from the *Chronicles of Narnia*...' (Radio 4, *A Point of View*, July)

There Can Be Only One. *Sunshine* director Danny Boyle on making sf films: 'They are really tough, they're very tough [...] I would recommend it to everybody. You should do one. But nobody does more than one – unless they're doing a *Star Wars* or something like that – no director goes back into space.' (ABC News Australia, July)

Robert Ludlum (1927–2001) 'is solidly among the most prolific of dead authors,' says the *Publishers Lunch* newsletter, with 12 new books released since he died and more coming. Eric Van Lustbader writes new Jason Bourne adventures: 'Now a "veteran science-fiction writer" is resuscitating another Ludlum character, Peter Chancellor...' Who could this be?

Harlan Ellison's 2006 defamation claim against Fantagraphics was settled in June. 'The parties are not at liberty to discuss the terms of the resolution at this time.'

THOG'S MASTERCLASS

Literary Similes Dept. 'His dust-iced skin zebraed by the sharp stripes of winter light which gushed apologetically – like hordes of white-frosted debutantes flashing their foaming silk petticoats in eager curtsies – between the regimented slats of his hand-built shutters.' 'A fierce blush – like two clumsily upended measures of sweet cherry brandy – slowly stained the immaculate cotton tablecloth of her soft complexion.' (both Nicola Barker, *Behindlings*, 2002)

Dept of Sentient Cabbage. 'She walked on to the grocery store to see if there were any vegetables left from the day's farmer's market thinking furiously.' (Kim Stanley Robinson, *Sixty Days and Counting*, 2007)

Senior Citizen Ailments Dept. '...a ghastly old crone, withered with age, eaten away by malice, disease, and invertebrates, glowing red with fire.' (David Bilsborough, *The Wanderer's Tale*, 2007)

Freak Accident Dept. 'Ten minutes later he was in a cab heading through the deserted streets for the Savoy. The cab was driving past Paddington Station when it hit him.' (Clive Cussler & Craig Dirko, *Sacred Stone*, 2004)

R.I.P.

Ingmar Bergman (1918–2007), legendary Swedish film director, died on 30 July; he was 89. The symbolic chess game with Death in *The Seventh Seal* (1957) may be the most famous and frequently homaged fantasy sequence in cinema.

Alice Borchardt (1939–2007), US nurse and author of historical fantasy novels – notably the werewolf sequence beginning with *The Silver Wolf* (1998), died on 24 July aged 67. She was Anne Rice's sister.

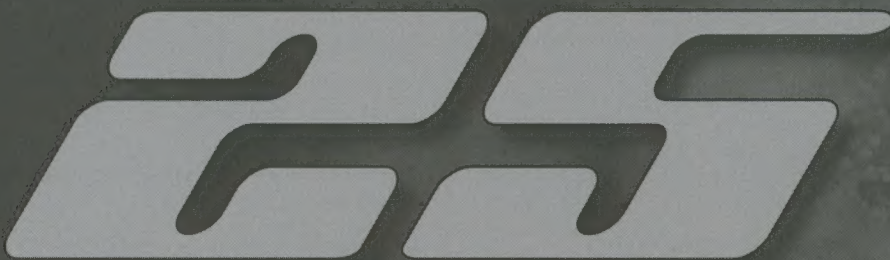
Roger P. Elwood (1943–2007), editor or co-editor of nearly 70 sf anthologies from 1964 to 1968, died on 2 February; he was 64. He was sf editor for Laser Books and other publishers, and wrote several religious fantasy novels 1988–1994.

Douglas Hill (1935–2007), Canadian-born sf author, reviewer and editor long resident in the UK, died on 21 June after being run over by a bus in Palmers Green, London; he was 72. Most of his sf novels were for children (he'd just completed a new trilogy); anthologies included *Window on the Future* (1966), *The Devil His Due* (1967), and *The Shape of Sex to Come* (1978).

Sterling E. Lanier (1928–2007), US author best known for *Hiero's Journey* (1974) and the stories collected in *The Peculiar Exploits of Brigadier Ffellowes* (1972) and its sequel, died on 28 June; he was 79. While editor at Chilton Books in the 1960s, Lanier successfully urged the publication of Frank Herbert's *Dune*.

Fred Saberhagen (1930–2007), US author and editor famed for his 'Berserker' killer-machine sequence, died on 29 June aged 77. Also of note are his 'Empire of the East' (science fantasy) and 'Swords' (fantasy) series. As an *Encyclopedia Britannica* editor (1967–73), he wrote the original *Britannica* sf entry.

John Gardner (1926–2007), UK author of many thrillers – some of them sf – died on 3 August; he was 80. His best-known spy creation Boysie Oakes goes into space in *Founder Member* (1969). Gardner produced 14 official James Bond continuations and two Bond film novelizations, including the sf *GoldenEye* (1995); he also wrote Holmesian novels centred on Professor Moriarty.



JAMES LOVEGROVE

I've reviewed for *Interzone*. I've interviewed for *Interzone*. I've had many short stories published in *Interzone*. I've been to the Friday-night *Interzone* drinks at The Mitre in Brighton, back when that was a regular fixture. *Interzone* has been an integral part of my career since the early 1990s. It's been a stepping stone, and a shoulder to lean on, and a home from home, and a fount of friendly advice and recommendations, and the source of praise, encouragement and an occasional, avuncular clip round the ear, and more besides. Through all its evolutions, whether floppy or glossy, smudgy or slick, the magazine has kept steady, being what it is, which is something nothing else can be: a safe haven for the best of not just British SF but all SF. Here's to the next quarter century!

MIKE ASHLEY

I went through a period when every magazine I subscribed to seemed to fold almost immediately afterwards. This was mostly American magazines, of course, because Britain had very few at that time in the sixties and seventies, or at least none that lasted very long. It's a trait that goes back to the very first magazine I subscribed to, *Magazine of Horror* in 1965. No sooner had I subscribed than it had problems and saw only one issue in the following year. Thankfully it survived a bit longer than that. But *Famous SF* didn't when I subscribed to that, nor *Weird Terror Tales*. Nor, moving on to the seventies, did *Cosmos* or *Odyssey* or *Questar* or *Skyworlds* or the Canadian *Stardust* or, in Britain, *Spacewise* or *Ad Astra* or *Other Times* or *Something Else*. And I contributed to *Science Fiction Monthly* so that was doubly-doomed. So it was with some trepidation that I sent in my first subscription to *Interzone* and was mildly surprised when it survived its first year. I was even more surprised when it went bimonthly and then monthly. Something was bucking the trend here. A magazine that could cope with me subscribing. And, of course, it got better. Much better. Other magazines I subscribed to still crashed pretty rapidly – *Beyond*, *R.E.M.*, *The Gate*, *Rigel* – but *Interzone* went from strength to strength. It was soon the backbone of British sf and doing something to revive hard sf. Good god. Now, of course, I realise the curse has reversed itself. I'm doomed to subscribe forever. Maybe if I had taken out one of those lifetime subscriptions I might just have got away with it. But no, *Interzone* and I are now locked for eternity.

SEAN McMULLEN

I suspect that the librarians in Brighton and Moorabbin municipal libraries were British, because from the time I started reading SF until I went to university I seemed to read mostly British books. This was not entirely bad, because while the Americans were good at adventure

and far-off, exotic worlds, one had the feeling that the British stories were not far from reality, and just might come true. The down side was that a fair number of them were seriously weird, however, so if they indeed reflect reality it was time to start worrying. I started buying *Interzone* when it first came out, partly to keep in contact with good, old-fashioned British weirdness, and partly in the hope that some of it would rub off on my writing. Finally I managed to sell to *Interzone*, and my second story began 'As I was walking through Westbury Forest, I met a man with a ring or green fire around his penis'. As I stood there by the postbox, flipping through my author's copy, I was so happy. I had finally achieved the British gold standard of weirdness. Thank you *Interzone*, long may you prosper.

CHRIS ROBERSON

Growing up in Texas, *Interzone* always seemed to be the product of some other world. Which it was, I suppose, in a very real sense. It was years before I ever saw a copy of it – the newsstands in the Texas town of Duncanville not well-known for stocking a wide variety of international genre magazines – but the name kept popping up in indicia as having been the original home of stories I loved in anthologies and short story collections. And when I studied the bibliographies of writers I admired, I found that invariably they had a listing for *Interzone* hiding in amongst their credits. In time, a kind of congruence developed, and the name itself became for me a kind of imprimatur of quality; when I encountered a writer with whom I wasn't familiar, if I saw that they had published in *Interzone*, I knew they would be worth checking out. It's a rule I've followed ever since, and I've yet to be steered wrong.

DANIEL KAYSEN

When I first sold a story to *Interzone* I tried to explain the feeling to a non-genre friend. "It's like getting a Peel Session," I said. John Peel's Radio 1 show – irredeemably British but with an extraordinarily International passion – still seems like a good analogy to *Interzone*. Peel of course is sadly RIP, but *Interzone* is not, and long, long may it continue.

KAREN FISHLER

Having admired *Interzone* from afar for so long, I was incredibly excited to be included in the first issue of the relaunched version. It's been equally exciting to be part of subsequent issues. Long live *Interzone*!

ALAN DOREY [part of the *Interzone* editorial collective, issues 1–12]

I couldn't really miss the chance of congratulating you on breathing

CELEBRATING 25 YEARS OF INTERZONE



new life into good ole *Interzone* in recent months and particularly now in its 25th anniversary year. I was there at the start – in fact, before the start, before *Interzone* had a name, before we even knew it was definitely going to exist and before we knew who was going to produce it. In 1981, I was Chairman of the BSFA and had also been on the committee that ran the British SF Convention that Easter along with David Pringle, Simon Ounsley and Graham James – Yorcon II in Leeds. We had a small surplus at the end and after due consideration in our local bar, The West Riding, we thought “Let’s start a magazine.” We had been real fans of *New Worlds* and what it had tried to do, so we wanted something that would be a *New Worlds* for the 1980s, something that would publish great fiction and be a proper outlet for aspiring writers. Only, how could we do it? Other than publishing an array of fanzines, we hadn’t really that much experience – or indeed cash. Coincidentally, I was approached by Malcolm Edwards who had independently wanted to start an SF magazine and he was keen for the BSFA to support it, particularly with publicity and promotion across its membership. Maybe even some financial support.

The mists of time are hazy here, but essentially, *Interzone* was born out of a marriage of the two groups and we started out as the Editorial Collective and a vision that, yes, *Interzone* would happen and would not only survive, but would be bought by all true SF fans and become an established fixture. The first few months were a big learning-curve, but through enthusiasm, skill, hard work and support from many others, it got there...and David Pringle deserves a massive vote of thanks for persevering so forcefully with it throughout the ’80s and ’90s – even at one stage producing a stable-mate, *Million: The Magazine of Popular Fiction*. So, although my direct involvement as an editor finished years ago, I do feel a warm glow whenever I see it on sale in my local Borders – and still buy it after all these years.

One final point: I agree in principal with your statement that it’s “Britain’s longest running SF magazine,” but technically, that won’t be the case until it reaches issue 217. The original *New Worlds* got to 201, there then followed ten paperback ‘quarterly issues’ numbered 1–10, then a break, then Charles Partington and others produced issues 211–5 in Manchester in the late ’70s before Charles Platt (who had edited some of the original run) wrestled it back and, with support from Michael Moorcock, started a new run with issue 216 in September 1979. His editorial said that “There is every reason to expect, now, that *New Worlds* will continue on a regular schedule appearing between three and six times a year.” Needless to say, I think that was it! So, you have a target to aim at: issue 217 and you’ll be the undisputed holder of the title! Very best wishes.

ANDY MILLS

The venerable Andy Sawyer used to edit a little reviews publication for the BSFA called *Paperback Inferno*. In the February 1986 issue he put out a request for somebody to review *Interzone*. I threw my hat into the ring and (undoubtedly because there were no other volunteers) got the gig. For six years, from PI #61 until the final PI (#97, in 1992) I reviewed every issue of *Interzone* from 15–61. (This is all very precise because I’ve been having fun digging through my old copies to check dates.) I was enthusiastic for the magazine then – which is why I reviewed it – and I’m enthusiastic for it now. IZ has certainly aged better than me, retaining its style and its cutting edge. Whilst the fiction isn’t always to my taste (and how dull and predictable would it be if it was!) what the magazine has always kept faith with is a consistent balance of stories and non-fiction – news, interviews and reviews – that for me have made it an essential part of my SF diet. I hope IZ is around in 25 years’ time, still young, still important.

ANDY SAWYER

How can I not send appreciations to IZ in its 25th year, especially when concrete evidence that the whole thing is part of my life is sitting in a cupboard at home, making the shelves warp ominously. Gosh, it seems a long time ago now. Somewhere in the *Interzone* archives – now warping shelves not too far from where I sit – is very possibly evidence that I was unhinged enough to submit fiction not once but (if memory serves) twice. Fortunately, that sensible Mr Pringle had enough taste to compose letters of rejection. And in any case, I can always destroy the evidence, and who would know. (It’s handy being a librarian, that way.) But in those early days – the monochrome covers, the calls for ‘radical hard sf’ – did I think that I would end up being *paid* to work in sf? A thousand times no. But I’m glad I’m here. And I’m gladder that *Interzone* has survived so long, to boost the careers of a lot of fine writers.

PETER CROWTHER

I have an enormous soft spot for *Interzone*, having posted numerous reviews and even one story (David Pringle was always a hard sell for me) in its and its long-ago sister *Million’s* pages over the years. You’d have to be soulless not to be impressed by today’s incarnation of IZ – particularly its new colourful format and delivery. Now more than ever, it is the UK’s flagship for quality short fiction. Here’s to the next quarter century.

If you would like to contribute please send your entry to the editorial address or email it to 25@ttapress.demon.co.uk

FEELINGS OF THE

FLESH

DOUGLAS ELLIOTT COHEN

ILLUSTRATED by WARWICK FRASER-COOMBE

Tarrik cocked his pistol and peered from behind a boulder that stood at the top of the rock-hewn stairs. Below, centered in the glen, there stood a table, laden with food. Flies buzzed about the feast in thick numbers, drawn to the chickens, wines, eggs, vegetables, fruits, cheeses and breads. Two benches lined the table, both of them unoccupied.

Several feet over, five Aberrates gathered around a dying tree. Dressed in animal skins, each of them carried a monstrous axe that hung from a crude leather notch, hooked to a belt of human skin. One of the creatures scratched under its armpit while shifting its stance. Over its broad shoulder, Tarrik spied a woman, tied to the tree's trunk.

"Enough talk." The creature's rumbling voice cut through the afternoon air. "I say we do it now."

"After we eat," said another. "I prefer such pleasures with something in my stomach."

"Agreed," said a third.

The large man-shaped creatures lumbered to the table. Their bloated stomachs quivered with each step, and several of them ran blue tongues along their lips in anticipation of the feast.

Tarrik grimaced. These Aberrates were of the Taster breed – the one he hunted was a Feeler. But her tracks led here, so she wanted him to find this lair. But to what end? So he could rescue the girl? Her presence seemed too unlikely for coincidence.

Tarrik adjusted his wide-brimmed hat as he shifted his attention back to the Tasters. The Feast of the Glutton had begun. The Tasters were devouring chickens. Guzzling wines. Stuffing cheese wedges into their slaving mouths. Each flavor had become enhanced, from robbing the girl's sense of taste. The enhancement lasted a short time – even shorter when the sense was divvied up – which explained why they ate like it was their last meal. There was another reason too, because if the enhancement remained in effect after they finished, other things might be tasted...like a human female.

Tarrik let the feast continue, his grim silence answered with noises of chewing, drinking and belching. Soon enough the table was made a wasteland. The Tasters stood, rubbing their bellies and picking between their teeth. One of them licked at the grease smearing its fingers. Its slothful eyes slid over to the girl, and it leered broadly, more grease dripping from its fat lips.

Tarrik stepped from behind his boulder and fired. The air *cracked* as the bullet obliterated the Taster's eye. Gore and brains splattered its companions before it could fall over dead. The others wheeled in confusion, drawing weapons and screaming challenges.

Tarrik busied himself reloading. When he heard a collective roar, bursting from



their throats, he knew he had been spotted. Bare feet slapped up the steps, and sunlight bounced off their axes. Tarrik squinted into the glare. Raised his gun. Gunpowder exploded, and the bullet lodged itself in the chest of the nearest creature. The Taster staggered, blood spilling onto its gut. But instead of falling it roared again and pressed onwards. Upwards.

Tarrik dropped his gun. Before it hit the ground he drew a pair of knives from his belt and hurled them. The wounded Taster and one other grabbed at their throats, which suddenly spurted blood to either side of the embedded blades. They collapsed as one, knocking into one of their own, and all three tumbled down the steps.

Tarrik unsheathed his sword, ducking as the last creature unleashed a ferocious swing of its axe. Steel whizzed overhead. Air tickled his neck. Before it could follow with a backswing, Tarrik rammed his shoulder into its stomach. In slow motion the creature seemed to tilt, mouth opening in a wide circle. Then it fell down the steps. Halfway down a different sort of crack cut through the afternoon, and its cries ceased.

Meanwhile at the foot of the stairs, the last Taster staggered to its feet. Tarrik bounded down two steps, leapt, and landed in a crouch next to it. The Taster's eyes widened, only to glaze as Tarrik sheathed his sword deep in its stomach. Crimson stained its yellow teeth, and it looked at the bounty hunter in disbelief.

"Taste it," he said, and he viciously twisted the blade before pulling it free.

The Taster collapsed like a felled tree. Blood leaked from under its body, cutting a red marsh through the grass. Breathing almost easy, Tarrik knelt beside the corpse and wiped his blade off on its flea-ridden clothes. Afterwards he stood, started towards the girl –

And his legs threatened to buckle. His breathing grew heavier than it had during the battle. The girl looked like Zaleen. The long legs and swanlike neck, the short dark hair...even her features were reminiscent of his dead love.

So this was the reason Olethia had lured him here, so she could rub salt in old wounds. One more thing she would answer for.

As Tarrik drew closer the girl fought her bonds, animal fear distorting her face. "I won't hurt you." Somehow he kept his voice calm. "Stay still so I can cut you loose."

She stopped struggling at once. Tarrik brought his sword down in a smooth stroke and the severed ropes fell to the grass. Without a word the girl rushed to the table, where she snatched a sliver of bloodstained cheese.

Almost eagerly, it seemed, she crammed it into her mouth. Over the next few seconds a gamut of emotions ran across her features while she chewed. Then she spit a sodden mass onto the table. "No!" She snatched a bottle of wine, swallowed what little remained, then hurled the glass against the mountainside. Glittering shards tumbled down the rocks.

"Nothing!" she screamed.

Sobbing, she picked through the remaining scraps on the table. Each time the result proved the same, with her spitting out chewed food and cursing. Tarrik kept quiet, letting her work the denial out of her system. Of the five senses, taste was one of the easier to lose. Such comfort would mean little to someone unable to know even the flavor of dust though. But sometimes the things people took for granted were what they missed most when gone.

By now the girl had tried everything. Still sobbing, she sank to her knees and wrapped her arms about her sides. "Nothing," she said again. Shivers wracked her. "Nothing at all."

Tarrik unfastened his cloak and knelt beside her. He draped the

wool around her shoulders, and she quickly wrapped it closer, like a child seeking protection in its blanket. Then she laid her tearful face against his chest. Tarrik stiffened. Instinct urged that he move back, but the girl needed reassurance. He cautioned himself to relax, and their contact went on.

"I can't be a Deficient," she said. "I don't want to be."

"No one does." Zaleen's bloodied corpse flashed through his mind. "No one."

"I'm an Intact," she said, her voice turning stubborn.

"What's your name?" He tried to keep his tone gentle, something that no longer came naturally to him.

"Weyna."

Since she had stopped crying, Tarrik decided it would be reasonable to separate. "I'm Tarrik. Can you stand?"

"Yes." He offered a gloved hand. Once she stood he let go. "Are you a bounty hunter?" she asked.

"I am."

Tarrik retrieved his knife from the throat of the nearest Taster. Kneeling beside its destroyed face, he pried its mouth open and reached inside with his fingers. He pulled the blue tongue out to its full extension, saliva hanging off its abnormally large taste buds. His knife came down, severing the tongue along the borders of the teeth. Blood pooled in the creature's mouth, and Tarrik slipped the prize into one of his pouches while moving on to the next corpse.

Weyna padded over. "You're collecting your bounty?" She sounded both revolted and curious.

"Aye." Another tongue tore loose, dripping blood onto his boot. "These prove my kills." At the next town he came to he would present them to the council. Based on the breed and number of trophies offered, he would be paid for his service to mankind. While bounty hunting was profitable to those skilled enough to excel in its practice, whatever wages Tarrik earned were but means to an end. When he awoke each morning until he slept each night, what truly mattered was the hunt.

Weyna followed him to the next carcass. "Five tongues should fetch a lot of coin."

"Enough." It took a few more seconds to finish the harvest. "I'll take you home," he said, cinching closed his pouch. "Where do you live?"

A trace of life returned to her features. "The valleys. A day's walk."

Tarrik hid a grimace. By the time he finished this errand Olethia's trail would be cold. But these mountains were crawling with Aber-rates. The girl was dead without him. "Let's be off. I want to cover as much ground as possible by nightfall." He led them towards the stairs.

"Wait," said Weyna. She walked to the table and from under one of the benches she picked up an apple. "For later." Frowning, she twisted it around by the stem. "I used to hate fruit."

Without a word more she started up the stairs.

.....
"I feel strange."

Tarrik glanced at the girl. She had been quiet since leaving the Tasters' lair. The silence had suited him fine. Conversation with someone who looked so like Zaleen would be awkward. Instead he had puzzled over Olethia, wondering what brought her to these mountains and what came next in this little game of hers.

"What's bothering you?" He kept one hand near his sword while noting every ridgeline and crevice, each boulder and shadow. Aber-rates could be lurking anywhere. "Stomach? Head?"

Weyna adjusted her borrowed cloak. "My head, it's -"

"Headache," said Tarrik, nodding - a common occurrence with new Deficients. "It will pass. Do you need to rest?"

"It's not a headache," said Weyna. "It's...something else." She sounded puzzled. And a little scared.

They had drawn to a stop now. Wind blew against their backs; dust swirled, and the air filled with the cackling of crones. Tarrik tensed before remembering that these mountains were called the Laughing Rocks. No matter how often he heard it, he could not get used to how the winds channeled here. Next time it might be children giggling or drunkards guffawing, or one of the other countless possibilities. It was enough to drive someone mad.

As if to mock him the crones fell silent. "If not a headache, what then?" he asked her.

Weyna chewed her lip. "It's like a...a presence." She cocked her head. "I can almost hear it."

"That was the wind," said Tarrik.

"No." Annoyance flashed over her features. "I've lived in the valleys my whole life. I know the laughter of these mountains. This is different." Her eyes narrowed and she pointed northwards. "That way."

Tarrik loosened his pistol from its leather holster. "What of it?"

"Whatever it is, it's that way." Her hand faltered. "I think."

"You think?"

Weyna rubbed her eyes. "I don't know. The...the presence, whatever it was. It's gone. But it felt like we're supposed to go to it."

"It's late," said Tarrik. People reacted to sense-theft in different ways. Some learned to cope. Others spiraled into black depressions. A few managed to rediscover happiness. And occasionally someone went mad. "Let's find shelter." Most likely this was hysteria from her intense shock. She would be fine in the morning.

"I'm not crazy," said Weyna. Her voice was defiant. "That's what you're thinking. I tell you, something's out there."

Tarrik met her gaze. "What I'm thinking is that it's suicide to travel these mountains at night." He gestured to the creeping shadows. "Perhaps there is something touching your thoughts. But now isn't the time to look for it."

He spun on his heel and set off. A faint scattering of pebbles informed him the girl was following. Tarrik slowed his pace until she walked beside him, so he might keep an eye on this hysterical companion of his.

They made camp in one of the caves. The moon had begun its climb over an hour ago. It would be full tonight. The winds laughed, this time reminding Tarrik of drunken soldiers at dice. Weyna had kept her peace since claiming she sensed a presence, except once, when she murmured that in the valleys they believed such laughter belonged to the gods, amused at the sufferings of those bound to this world.

Tarrik considered these words. Gods could offer the gift of faith. Against the Aberrates, a sword and several rounds of bullets would preserve more lives. So let others believe in higher causes if they wished to. Tarrik was content with steel.

And vengeance.

He took another bite of his dried beef and stole a glance at Weyna. The girl had cocooned herself within his cloak, only her head peeking above the wool. Despite this, she continued shivering. Tarrik refused to build a fire though - flames would attract Aberrates to their location like moths.

A crunching noise filled the cave. When Tarrik looked again,

Weyna was eating her apple. Good. People who had their taste stolen often lost the will to eat. Perhaps some food in her system would settle her thoughts.

Weyna lifted the apple for another bite. Paused. Then she sniffed the fruit. "It smells...strong."

Tarrik nodded. "When our bodies lose a sense others sharpen to compensate. Loss of taste will heighten your sense of smell."

Weyna sniffed again. "I can almost taste it."

There was a catch in her voice that left Tarrik bracing himself for more tears.

Instead she changed the subject. "You fired something at the Tasters. What was it?"

Tarrik slid his pistol free of the holster. "It's called a gun."

"Where did you get it?"

"Far to the west, on the island of Varril. It's the homeland of the Metal King, he who discovered the lost secrets to crafting Witch Metals. This gun is made with them."

Weyna edged closer. "The Witch Metals are magical?"

Tarrik shook his head. "They're crafted from other metals, from the earth, but forged into something stronger. My sword and knives are made from steel. Steel comes from iron, and so it's a Witch Metal. But these metals and weapons come from the art of science, not magic."

"Oh." She sounded disappointed. "My brother makes fun of me because I believe in magic. I think it created the Aberrates." She hesitated. "What do you think?"

Tarrik slipped his gun back into its holster. "In Varril they say the Witch Metals caused it, back in the ancient days. They claim weapons made of this stuff caused fiery explosions that changed men into Aberrates. Not that the truth makes much difference. A monster is a monster."

Weyna sucked in a breath. "Maybe the presence I sensed was magical!" When Tarrik said nothing, the excitement drained from her features. "You really didn't sense it? Nothing at all?"

"Nothing," said Tarrik. He held no belief in magic, and no breed of Aberrate could touch a man's thoughts. The likeliest explanations were his earlier theories. "I sensed nothing at all."

Weyna met his gaze. "I won't mention it again." Moonlight glimmered in her eyes like a silver madness. "It's dangerous to wear your hat," she said, tossing her apple core into the back of the cave. She shifted topics like nothing had happened. "People will think you're hiding big ears. They'll call you a Listener."

"I'll take my chances."

"Can I see you without it?"

He wanted to say no, but the girl's emotions were stretched tighter than harp strings. And if she had gone mad, keeping her placated would be best. "If you must," he said.

"Let's go outside so I can see clearly," she said. She had either missed or ignored his hint.

Tarrik followed her into the night. Under the light of moon and stars he removed his hat. The winds stirred to life then, hissing like a band of hyenas. Weyna's eyes widened as she took in his white spiked hair and his scarred forehead. "You're him!" she said, her voice soft but sharp. "The Marked Huntsman." She raised a hand towards the puckered X that split his brow.

"Please don't touch me."

Her hand flinched back. "I - I'm sorry."

"I don't like being touched," he told her curtly. He would not tolerate this girl who looked like Zaleen touching his scar, whatever her condition. He settled his hat back into place, pulling the brim

over his scar. "And don't mention that name again. It draws attention like a flaming arrow."

The girl hung her head. "I won't speak of it."

The hurt in her voice ran deep, making Tarrik wonder if he had been too harsh with her. But saying more would lead to conversations he wished to leave unspoken. "We move with dawn's light, so you'd best get some sleep. I'll take first watch."

Weyna took a step towards the cave. Looked back. "Aren't you coming?"

"I like the fresh air."

"Do you want your cloak?"

"Use it as a blanket," he answered.

She shuffled her feet. "Thank you for saving me."

Tarrik gave a brusque nod, watching her melt into the shadows. Then he sat and crossed his legs. He would be going sleepless tonight, so he did his best to get comfortable. With her sanity in question, Tarrik had no intention of letting the girl stand watch. Abandoning her would be easiest, but she had done nothing to bring this on herself. That said, getting sleep was proving itself a serious problem; for three days he had been tracking Olethia on very scarce rest.

Tarrik laid his sword across his knees. Then he drew his pistol. From one of his pouches he removed a length of wire, which he inserted into the pistol's snout. Cleaning the weapon was a nightly routine – guns were imperfect things. When he caught up with Olethia, he would not be foiled by a night of laziness leading to a jammed compartment at a critical moment.

Three years he had been hunting this Feeler, ever since Zaleen's death. Olethia had sliced the X into his forehead during the battle. *Something to keep you pretty.* Her words were scarred into his memory as surely as those nails had scarred his forehead. She could have killed him that night, but had grasped that living would be his greater punishment.

From inside the cave Weyna interrupted his thoughts as she murmured in her dreams. The girl's introduction was an interesting development. A hierarchal system governed the Aberrates, with Tasters dwelling at the bottom, Feelers the top. Olethia had ordered those Tasters to kidnap the girl. Nothing else made sense. Of course, alerting them to Weyna's presence would have been enough. Besides the lure of another Feast of the Glutton, raping and afterwards masticating attractive humans was a favorite pastime of Tasters.

But Olethia had wanted Tarrik to find the girl before this occurred – a chewed-up corpse would not reveal her likeness to Zaleen. It meant the Feeler had more planned. But what –

Screams cut through the night. Tarrik scrambled to his feet, sword and pistol ready, before realizing that the screams issued from the cave. Swearing, he dashed inside and spotted Weyna, thrashing with the delirium of nightmares. He set his weapons down, grabbed her shoulder and shook it. "Wake up."

She screamed louder. "No! Stay back!"

"Wake up, damn you!" He slapped her hard across the face. Weyna bolted awake. Before she could scream again Tarrik's hand shot out and squeezed her cheeks hard.

"Don't scream," he said softly. "You'll attract Aberrates."

Sweat dripped from her brow onto his gloved hand. Eyes wide, she nodded. Tarrik waited another few seconds before letting go. "Say nothing."

In silence they waited several minutes. Outside the winds blew, wheezing like amused old men. At last Tarrik loosed a breath. This girl would be the death of him. He sheathed his sword, but kept the pistol in hand. Weyna's hands were shaking. Tarrik picked up the

cloak she had discarded. "Dreams have no flesh," he said, handing it back, "no bones or blood. They're shadows. We have monsters enough in this world." He tapped his forehead. "Don't let them dwell here as well."

Her hands stopped shaking. Her breathing calmed. She swallowed before speaking. "It was like no dream I've ever had. It..." She bit on her lip.

"Yes?"

"Nothing," she mumbled. "I promised not to talk about it."

Tarrik ran a hand over his face. "The presence?"

Weyna nodded, but this time her expression offered no defiance, just the frightened exhaustion of someone who wanted to go home.

"Tell me about it."

Weyna hesitated. "You're certain?"

Tarrik chuckled. There was little to laugh about, but at least the amusement was his instead of the wind's. "We're not moving until daybreak, and I doubt sleep is in our future. Tell me about it."

Weyna smiled. Her likeness to Zaleen struck him again, splitting him open like a tree hit by lightning. "I was in a cave," she said. Tarrik kept his face a mask as her dream-tale unfolded. "The lighting was dim. There was water dripping. A man spoke my name, but he did it in here." She touched her temple. "And there was pain in his voice, pain like I didn't know was possible."

Her breathing turned heavy while she related the details. "I saw him in the corner. Covered under blankets and shadows. He asked us for help."

"I was there too?"

Weyna stared into the star-riddled night. "No," she said after a time. "But he called for you as well."

Despite himself, Tarrik had grown interested. "What does he need?"

"We have to save him from the Sighter."

Tarrik's grip tightened around his pistol. Sighters had killed his parents. "What Sighter?"

"It appeared from nowhere. I just remember its eyes...so big." Fresh sweat soaked her brow. But she also continued shivering, so that she looked feverish. "It came toward me and I panicked."

That must have been when she started screaming. "If the Sighter is there, then it's probably too late."

"I suppose." Doubt filled her voice. "The man...he kept talking to me. I couldn't really understand him, because I was screaming. But I do remember one thing he said."

"Oh?" With the story winding down Tarrik stood. "What's that?"

"He mentioned a name...Olethia."

Tarrik froze. "Where did you hear that name?"

"I told you. In the dream."

Very deliberately he pulled back the trigger on his pistol, the click filling the cave like thunder. "Don't lie to me."

Weyna scuttled back a few steps, teeth chattering with cold. "I'm not." Her voice held a panicked note.

She sounded sincere. But Tarrik had never spoken that name in her presence. Never. He realized then that he had cocked his gun. He needed to calm down. He needed to sleep.

He lowered the gun, his thumb reaching for the trigger. "I believe you. Let's go over that dream again. Start from –" He stopped and his head whipped towards the outside like a startled deer.

"What is it?"

"Shh." Tarrik closed his eyes, concentrating. Over the winds, which laughed in slow, broken chuckles, he heard several voices...singing voices. No words accompanied them, but the melodies

carried a language nonetheless, sweet notes bidding its audience listen...and surrender.

"Listeners," he said grimly.

"I don't hear anything."

"You will." Tarrik reached into one of his pouches and withdrew two gobs of wax. "Plug these into your ears."

Weyna took them. "What about you?"

"I only have one set." He reached back to his belt, and this time unsheathed one of his knives. "Take this," he said, pressing it into her palm. The singing drew closer, and a dullish expression filled Weyna's face. "And plug your damned ears."

The girl did as ordered, and Tarrik led them into the night. Even in the open air the melodies surrounded them, and Tarrik was aware of their cloying presence...stroking his mind like teasing fingers...imploing him to listen.

Tarrik clamped his jaw and escaped into memories:

"Farewell, Tarrik."

"You can't die."

"No choice...love you."

As the spark faded from Zaleen's eyes, he clutched her dripping red hand, blocking out the pain gushing from his forehead. "I promise you Olethia will die. I promise."

The singing grew to a crescendo. From above, three creatures leapt from an outstretched lip of rock, silhouettes against the moon.

Tarrik fired, and the air filled with the smell of sulfur. One of the creatures stiffened, limbs jerking and contorting as it fell. When it crashed into the earth, the song weakened. Its two companions landed next to the broken form with feline ease. Cruel smiles lit their faces, and knives danced between their slender fingers. Tarrik slammed his pistol home, unsheathing his sword as the creatures spread out. Their massive ears fluttered, the frenetic pace announcing their eagerness.

Then they attacked. Steel flickered and sparks leapt as Tarrik parried and countered, whirling between the attackers with grace equal to theirs. The ring of blades created counter-melodies to the perverted music issuing from the Listeners' mouths, threatening to interrupt the rhythms of their song.

Seconds later their melodies underwent a subtle alteration, as they suddenly turned into harmonies, providing accompaniment to the music of the steel. The modulated notes slid through Tarrik's consciousness, saturating it, wearing down his mind with tireless assaults. A knife slipped past his guard, drawing blood along his forearm. When he parried a second thrust the other creature attacked, and its streaking blade grazed his jaw.

He needed to turn the tide, and fast.

Suddenly the Listener nearest him reeled in surprise. Weyna followed after it, screaming as she pressed her advantage, moonlight glimmering along her knife as she swung with wild strokes. The fog gripping Tarrik's mind lessened, but before he could aid the girl the other Listener stepped into his path.

Tarrik feinted high and plunged his sword through an exposed hip as it raised its knives to parry. Blood sprayed in all directions, and the limping creature unleashed the full force of its song. Melodies exploded with the force of cyclones, seeking to ensnare the hunter's mind, bind him to their cadences. Tarrik fought back with the last trick he had: he started singing.

"Ooooooh, she bore that trait that all men hate, 'cause my bonnie lass was an Aberrate. With that golden voice that she cast as bait, she lured me close then she sealed my fate..."

Tarrik kept singing, pitching his voice in unending sharps and

flats, just as Zaleen had taught him. His off-key rendition clashed with the Listener's melodies, causing its ears to flap like maddened butterflies. When its features creased with concentration, Tarrik belted out another tone-deaf verse, louder than before:

"So I sit here as I drink my beer, regaling all the tale of my sweet lost dear. Just one last time I'd like to hear...at least when she died I saw that fear!"

The Listener's melody faltered. Tarrik lashed out. The creature's head parted from its shoulders in a blood-fountain that drenched his clothes. He whirled around to aid Weyna...but she and the remaining Listener had vanished.

Then from somewhere close a cooing filled the night. The sound wasn't meant for human ears, and as Tarrik's mind processed it, it scrambled his senses. For a few seconds he could taste metallic echoes bouncing off the rocks...smell the red-wine scent of a voice shifting from tenor to soprano...and for less than an eye-blink it seemed he could feel liquid-soft music, washing over his skin.

Tarrik recognized this moment – the Song of the Siren, the music loosed before a feeding. With every shred of his will he pushed aside the jumbled stimuli and took off at a dead run. In the back of his thoughts he cursed Olethia; too much time had passed for the creatures to be drawn by Weyna's nightmare. This was *her* doing, the latest twist in her sadistic game.

Up ahead he spotted a boulder-lined path, and he plunged along it, stumbling over pebbles and rocks. When the night suddenly fell silent – not even the winds offering amusement – all he could think of was Zaleen, and how he refused to let this happen again. Gasping, he reached the end of the path.

It forked in opposite directions. He suppressed the scream bubbling up his throat to keep from alerting the Listener. But if he chose wrong it would make little difference. Nor could he waste time debating. He dashed off to the right.

No. Go left.

Tarrik fell to his hands and knees as he skidded to a stop. There had been a voice. In his mind. He was certain.

Left you fool! Hurry!

Tarrik dashed off in the other direction. Within seconds the path hooked and leveled onto a flat stretch of land.

Then he saw them. They knelt beneath the twinkling stars, oblivious to his presence. The creature's lips were wrapped about one of her ears, sucking like a babe at its mother's teat, its own ears undulating in quivering waves. Weyna sat through it unmoving, unblinking, dull expression staring into nothingness.

Tarrik hurled his remaining knife. The blade buried itself in the Listener's shoulder, and the creature jerked back from Weyna in surprise. From out of her ear uncoiled a long forked tongue, and as the Listener reached for its knives, a fresh song bubbled to its lips.

Tarrik ran to meet it. As the first melodic notes filled the night a slim hand reached to the Listener's belt. Steel glimmered and the song stopped. The Listener stared in shock at one of its own blades, deep in its chest. Weyna twisted the steel and a backhand sent her sprawling. The Listener staggered to its feet before promptly collapsing back to its knees. Its large ears flapped a final time and it fell in a heap.

Tarrik knelt beside Weyna. The winds awoke as he did, tittering like maidens. "Can you hear me?"

She climbed to her feet, rubbing at her cheek. "Yes. The plugs slowed it down."

Then she turned and kicked the Listener in its side, hard enough that a rib cracked. She kicked it again, the sound like a branch snap-

ping in deepest winter.

"I'm not food!"

Weyna kicked it several more times before dropping to her knees. Then she yanked the knife from the Listener's chest and brought it down in two savage slashes. The steel clattered against the earth as she stood, and in her hands she gripped a pair of large ears. Pearls of blood dripped from their lobes and a morbid smile stretched across her lips.

"We'll be wanting these," she said.

Weyna stole another glance at him. "We're almost there."

They had traveled through the night to reach the valleys. The Laughing Rocks still encircled the lands like monstrous teeth, but here the grass stretched low and even, offering Aberrates few places to hide. So Tarrik found his tired thoughts drifting to other matters.

Like Weyna. She had been glancing at him often. Yesterday he had still suspected she had gone crazy. Now he knew better. So rather than seeing just another Deficient fighting to keep sane, instead he found the battle had become his own, as he fought his growing attraction towards the spitting image of his dead love.

But such desires were directed towards a ghost of the heart. Nothing would come of this. He wouldn't let it.

Weyna glanced at him again. "How are your wounds?"

Tarrik ran his thumb along the scratch on his jaw. "Healing."

"I mean do they hurt?"

"No."

"But the one on your forearm looks —"

"Far worse than it is," he said briskly. This girl asked too many questions.

"Oh." Weyna grasped her new string necklace. A large ear decorated it. "Who was she?"

Tarrik clenched his hands, until his leather gloves creaked. "Who?"

"The one whose memory tattoos your features."

Anyone else he would tell to mind off. But the two of them had been through much, more than he would expect in so short a time. "Her name was Zaleen," he said, saying her name for the first time in three years.

"May I ask how it happened?"

Three years was a long time to carry pain unshared. "She was a bounty hunter. Best I ever met."

"Better than you?"

"Better by far," said Tarrik, a half-smile playing across his lips. "Seven years ago there was a bounty on this pair of Smellers terrorizing the Meadows of Blood. We both sought the reward and ended up working together. After we delivered their noses and collected our coin, we took to the road. Love followed." His smile faded and his voice turned flat. "Then three years ago we took this assignment against a Feeler." He paused. "Her name was Olethia."

Weyna gasped. "But that's —"

Tarrik nodded. "Now you know why I reacted as I did to that name." Briefly he considered telling her about the voice that had touched his thoughts. But these memories of Zaleen had been bottled up for so long. He continued with his tale. "She took us by surprise. Zaleen was killed, but not before her touch was stolen." He lifted his hat, exposing the X. "I was given this, and I've been hunting Olethia since."

"For vengeance."

"To flay her skin," he said. Sometimes it was good to specify.

Weyna toyed with the lobe of her necklace. "I suppose her skin will fetch a high price."

"The Metal King could beggar himself for all I care. Even *he* couldn't offer enough to part me from her hide."

"Then you mean to *keep* it? For what?"

"Feelers have very durable skin. And in case you've forgotten, I could use a new cloak."

Weyna shuddered and fumbled at the clasp of his garment. "You should take this one back."

"Keep it," he told her. "Something to remember me."

She nodded her thanks, and several minutes passed before she spoke again. "So once you see me home you'll be continuing your hunt?"

There was an odd note to her voice. Disappointment or concern? It changed nothing either way. "The hunt is all that matters."

The girl pressed on though. "And should you kill Olethia? What then?"

Tarrik brushed his fingers along those pouches containing the ears and tongues. "Keep hunting."

Weyna made as if to touch him but stopped short of his arm. "You said Zaleen was the better hunter. How will you defeat Olethia alone?"

Hearing this woman speak the names of the two females who had ruled his life all these years stirred his emotions in ways more complex than he wanted to consider. And he had answered enough questions already. "There are ways if one is willing."

Weyna waited for him to offer more, and Tarrik realized how much she wanted him to open his world, to let her inside. But his world was his alone. Either this, or risk losing someone else he loved. Still, there was one thing he could do. "And you were right," he said. "About what?"

"The voice. It spoke to me last night. Told me where to go after the Listener kidnapped you."

Weyna closed her eyes. "I knew it." Her body relaxed, as if relieved of a terrible burden. When she looked at Tarrik again determination marked her face. "After I stop home we must go back. Look for the voice. He obviously needs our —"

"I can't."

Weyna stopped. Her expression could only be described as betrayed. "Why?" she finally asked.

"I need to find Olethia."

"Then I'll go alone."

Her words held a challenge. They held a plea as well. But three years ago Tarrik had made a promise. "We all do as we must," he said.

Weyna removed her necklace and tossed it to him. "Here." She started walking. "Something to remember me."

"I'm sorry." Nothing he said could ease her hurt, but the pain would pass quickly. In a few days he would be another memory. "I'll see you home though."

Weyna pointed. "I am home."

Against the horizon a farmhouse had sprung into view. Tarrik's mouth went sour and very dry. "No village?"

"The nearest village is two days from here. Papa refuses to leave this land. It's been in our family for generations."

Three days of exhaustion struck at once, and Tarrik wanted nothing so much as to curl up onto the grass and sleep. "We need to get your family to the village," he said.

Weyna stopped. "Why?" There was no mistaking the sudden fear in her voice.

"Because," he said, bracing for what was to follow, "the farm isn't safe. Olethia wants you dead. I'm certain she set the Tasters on you, probably the Listeners as well."

"Why would she do this?" Weyna shook her head. "What am I to her?"

Tarrik pulled his hat low, avoiding her gaze. "You look like Zaleen. And Olethia knows whatever suffering she brings upon you is also mine."

Silence answered him. When he peered from underneath his hat, he found Weyna staring at the farm, blood drained from her face.

"She might be there already." As if someone else instead of she had spoken these words, Weyna gasped as the implications dawned on her. "Mother!" She unsheathed the knives she had collected from one of the Listeners. "Father!" She broke into a run. "Adrew! I'm coming!"

"Wait," Tarrik hissed. He reached for her but snatched air as Weyna's long legs left him behind. Swearing, he took off in pursuit, unsheathing his own knives as he did.

Even before he reached the farmhouse he spotted the telltale signs of death.

Weyna had been shivering all day but the chimney stood dry of smoke. Laundry flapped unattended on clotheslines. And circling high above it all were several black-feathered birds.

Crows.

The farmhouse drew closer. Behind it a mountain loomed. The front door had been broken off its hinges, but Weyna paid no attention to his shouted warnings as she dashed within. Tarrik followed after her, and inside the house clutters of old furniture greeted him.

"Weyna?"

A scream answered him. Tarrik ran down the closest hallway and several steps later reached the kitchen. Weyna stood in the middle of its wooden floor, gaze transfixed on the counter. Lying across its blood-soaked length were a butcher's knife and fingers scattered like so much sausage.

Weyna pointed with her own trembling finger. "Those belong to my parents. I can see their wedding bands."

Tarrik beckoned her away. "Come." She complied, following in a daze.

They found her parents upstairs in their bedroom, their mutilated bodies upon the bed's red-soaked sheets, naked limbs entwined one last time. "Let's find my brother," said Weyna. Her voice was duller than a blunted knife.

They searched the house. Afterwards they looked outside. Several pigs escaped from their pen wandered about but no sign was found of Adrew. Weyna seated herself on the family well, expression still filled with shock. "Where is he?"

Tarrik's gaze traveled to the mountain looming behind the house. "Your brother was attractive, wasn't he?"

Weyna blinked, as if waking from a heavy sleep. "How did you know that?"

Tarrik seated himself next to her, hands resting on his knees. "Feelers live for the pleasure of touch...in all its forms."

Weyna stared at him for a long time. Then she slapped him. The force of the blow twisted his head in the opposite direction. "Afterwards!" she screamed. A pig squealed and ran off. "Always you tell me things afterwards, and I'm forced to dance like a puppet on strings. Once, just *once*, I'd like to know something beforehand, be treated like I matter."

The bounty hunter tried to think of something to say. "I'm sorry."

Weyna stood and jabbed a finger at him. "You're *not* sorry! To be sorry you need to care. But you only care about yourself."

Tarrik stiffened, as if she had slapped him again. "That isn't true."

Her eyes narrowed. "I speak of the living."

Tarrik shot to his feet. "What gives you the right -"

She cut him off. "I never asked to be rescued." Her breathing came heavy as she spoke. "I'm grateful that you saved me, but since then I've been treated as nothing but a burden and an afterthought. Well, I'll admit to the former, but what gives you the right to treat me like a pawn when I'm so involved in this?"

The anger radiated from her in waves. Tarrik reached inside himself, searching for his rebuttal. But all he did was touch the cheek she had slapped. "She haunts me," he said. "Three years after her death and her memory still burns inside me like a fire. Even dead she is my life, the spark that lights me."

Weyna tapped her temple. "Last night you told me there are monsters enough in this world. That I mustn't let them dwell up here." She lowered the hand over her heart. "You can't let them dwell here either. Because you've turned her memory into a monster... and it's eating you alive."

She dared then to grasp his shoulder. But all Tarrik did was stare into her red-rimmed eyes, needing to hear what would be said next.

"There must be more to life than the hunt," she told him.

She removed her hand. Tarrik took a moment to mull this over. Then he stood and started walking towards the mountain behind the farmhouse.

"What are you doing?" she called.

"Hunting," he said over his shoulder. "For your brother."

Olethia wanted her tracks discovered. Once Tarrik searched near the mountain he found her trail almost immediately. So now he and Weyna endured these slopes once more while crouching outside a cave, staring at the footprints that disappeared into its darkness.

"A moment," Tarrik whispered. From his backpack he withdrew a torch brand, and from one of his pouches a pair of flints. Less than a minute later an orange fire danced to the merriment of the winds. With his free hand Tarrik drew his pistol. "Stay behind me." He approached the cave, Weyna following with her knives drawn.

Inside the cave proved empty, while outside the winds laughed like children at a game of hide-and-find. Tarrik pushed onwards, his breathing echoing off the stones. The light of his torch fell across a boulder.

Wet blood smeared it. Weyna hurried to the rock and looked behind it. "Adrew!" Her voice broke.

Tarrik came behind her. The lad breathed, just barely. Claws had raked his chest and thighs, and chunks of flesh had been bitten off his muscular shoulders. Blood had pooled in his bellybutton, and his bruised phallus was twitching.

"I'll carry him." He handed off the pistol and torch, crouched and gathered the body in his arms. Outside, they tended his wounds as best they could - cleansing them with water and binding them in cloth - before continuing on. Weyna held the gun on the way back, guarding their passage. By the time they returned to the farmhouse Tarrik dripped with sweat.

Weyna spread her cloak by the family well and Tarrik laid her brother on its length. Weyna drew up a bucket of water, and Tarrik made certain it had not been poisoned before letting her use it. Then she tore a fresh strip of cloth from her shirt, soaked it, and knelt beside her brother. She rested Adrew's head on her lap and wrung a few drops of water onto his lips.

His eyes flickered open. "Weyna?" His bruised face spread into a grin. "I was worried." He touched her cheek - skin had been bitten off several knuckles. "Are you hurt?"

"I'm...I'm just fine."

"Good. Good." His eyes flickered weakly. "Where's Olethia?"

Weyna tensed. "Why?"

"She showed me paradise. I wish to return."

Weyna laid a palm over his forehead. "You've a fever. You need to rest."

"Rest..." and his expression glazed with death.

Weyna buried her face against his chest and her tears broke free at last. Tarrik did his best to look in her direction as little as possible while still keeping watch. Olethia had taken her time with this one, and Tarrik knew her work well, enough to realize how much pain she had mixed with Adrew's pleasure.

Yet another reason the bitch would pay.

"We need to bury him," said Weyna. She had stopped crying quite suddenly. "We need to bury them all. Now."

They found shovels in an old tool shed and worked the earth beneath the shadow of the mountain. No words were spoken, and by the time the last heap of soil had been thrown upon the last of the mounds, the stars had awakened. Weyna jammed her shovel into the nearest mound with such force it quivered. "I'm coming with you," she said.

Tarrik refused risking *déjà vu*. "Let me take you to the village."

"It's not a request. I want her dead as much as you."

"Weyna -"

Above them some pebbles clattered down the mountainside. Weyna took no notice, and Tarrik pretended to consider her words as he scanned the ledges above. The shadows were too thick to reveal anything, but he knew. He raised his voice ever so slightly. "You said there must be more to life than the hunt."

"But I never said to give the hunt up."

"You're certain about this?"

She jerked her head. "You know I am."

"Then listen. I'll find Olethia's trail from the cave. You wait here."

"But -"

"No buts. You know these mountains, but I've been hunting these creatures twenty years. You'll only slow me down. By the time I return I expect your gear packed and fresh provisions gathered for both of us. Understand?"

At these instructions much of her bluster faded. "But...I...you can't leave me here. Please."

Tarrik knew how difficult this must be for her, but he had to see it through. "Olethia expects me to take you to the village. She won't seek you here. If we're patient we'll surprise her." Doubts swam over her features. Tarrik removed one of his gloves and touched her arm. "You must trust me."

Surprise, followed by flickers of understanding, crossed her features. Smart girl. "I will," she said. "Will you help me board up the front door before you go?"

"Of course."

Tarrik whispered as they worked. "She was watching from the mountain."

"I didn't hear anything," Weyna whispered back.

"You wouldn't." He considered telling her something about his past but held back. Time was of the essence. "She won't come here until she's satisfied I'm not baiting her. She's wary, so it will take a few hours at least. Stay inside the whole time, just in case."

"I want to fight," she said fiercely.

"You will. But you staying here is too good an opportunity for Olethia to pass up. I'll be waiting when she comes. Just wait for me to attack first. It's our best chance."

They had finished boarding the front door and had piled several

pieces of furniture against it. "After this is over," he told her, "we'll see about finding this mysterious voice."

Weyna, sidling between a pair of rocking chairs, stopped and stared through the stirred dust. "You would do this?"

"There must be more to life than the hunt."

She nodded briskly and led him to the back door. Tarrik started off towards the mountain, and behind him came the click of a door closing shut, followed by several locks sealing into place. Traveling the mountains in darkness was a dangerous thing. But the trap had been baited and he intended to see it sprung. Tarrik started up one of the paths.

It ended tonight.

Mama loved grapes. Born and raised near the Valley of the Emerald Vines, she had been a wine merchant's daughter. From the stories she told, Weyna knows that grandfather taught Mama the names of the hundred best vintages before she could even count to this number. While not wealthy her family's status had been respectable, so grandfather had been furious when she fell in love with a pig farmer who lived near the Laughing Rocks.

"He's a rarer vintage than he looks," Mama said while standing on the doorstep of her old home. "He grows on the palate."

Grandfather slammed the door in her face. While the rain poured down. Or so the story went. Mama had taken up with Papa and soon after they married. She learned the ways of pigs and slop and butchering, never uttering a complaint, even enjoying the work.

But Papa knew she missed her wines.

While far from wealthy and a goodly distance from respectable in his financial means, each year he still managed to set aside his grape money. And when the merchants stopped at the village each autumn for the harvest festival, Papa would spend these carefully saved coins on a vintage of his pick, along with a bushel of grapes, imported from the Valley of the Emerald Vines.

Mama would take this bushel, and with the old family recipe she would make a batch of wine that "could make a Taster's eyes roll up in his skull and never come back." Or so she always said. Afterwards they would let the vintage age until the first true snow. Then Weyna and Adrew would sit at the kitchen table, while Mama poured her homemade, generations-old recipe, and Papa filled them each a glass of his annual pick. Mama had taught them the finer points of wine tasting, so during the competition she and Adrew knew not to swallow, only swish inside their mouths.

It made no difference in the judging though. Mama's recipe always won.

Weyna is sitting at the kitchen table. She has poured herself a glass of Mama's homemade wine that she has retrieved from the cellar. It occurs to her that Mama never taught her the recipe. She meant to, but there was always another pig to be butchered, more laundry to wash, or a piece of furniture needing reupholstering. Soon they would promise each other. We'll do it soon.

Soon has become never. More bottles rest in the cellar, but the recipe is as dead as her family. Weyna sniffs her drink. The sweet fumes rush through her nostrils, and she almost tastes the wine on the back of her tongue. Quickly she takes a gulp, hoping to fool her taste buds. Warmth slides down her throat, into her stomach, and she remembers Mama's wine, oh she remembers it clearly. But it is not the same and never will be.

Tarrik has been gone less than an hour. She has already gathered what she means to keep, and it sits in a backpack beside her chair. Once she leaves she will never come back to this house. She is

uncertain where she will go or what she will do. Tarrik is not an option. She sees that now. They share a common goal but nothing more. Whatever strides he makes, he will always be ruled by the shadows of his past. While Weyna grieves for her family, and will continue to for a long time, she is stronger than this. She needs someone strong like her. They will still look for this voice, because the man needs their help, but afterwards she and Tarrik will part. She must carve herself a life.

But for now she waits. She lifts one of her knives from the table and runs her thumb along its edge, testing its sharpness. A web of blood opens along the skin. The pain seems small compared to what she has suffered. She is so restless and would much prefer action to the countless thoughts parading through her mind.

Life as a Deficient will be difficult. Perhaps she can make use of her enhanced sense of smell, become a poison-smeller for some lord. But many will treat her like a lower class – Intacts often receive more respect because of their wholeness.

Some lands consider it a crime, but perhaps she could keep her lack of taste a secret. Blindness cannot be hidden. Deafs are usually revealed over time. Lack of feeling can be concealed, though this can be difficult, especially with matters of love. But taste and smell can be hidden easily. The key will be her reactions. When she eats and drinks, once in a while she must remember to convey enjoyment or disgust.

And she must never overreact to the smells. This will be difficult early on. She wonders how animals handle the different scents if their noses are so sensitive. Perhaps it becomes easier with time. But today, now, it seems as if each smell is being experienced for the first time. And she has never before noticed how much home smells like home. The sweat of Papa and Adrew, heavy with the stink of pigs, the wine fumes drifting up from the cellar, the carrot stew Mama often prepared, which hangs so heavy in the air...

She reaches a trembling hand towards her wineglass. Finds it empty. She picks up the bottle, pours, and keeps pouring.

Weyna.

Bottle and wineglass slip from her hands. Glass shatters. Jagged pieces slide over the floor. A red puddle spreads more slowly.

Weyna. I know you hear me.

She has scuttled into a corner, and she holds her knives ready to stab. "What do you want?" she says aloud.

Come to me...before it's too late.

The voice sounds weak. Pain-riddled. "Where are you?"

The mountains.

"Mountains are big." What a foolish thing to say. But true.

The mountain near your home. I'll lead you. Please, come.

If she leaves, Tarrik will have no idea. "I don't know you."

But you trust me. You sense this in your heart.

"I don't trust my senses anymore."

The voice laughs before falling into fits of coughing. *Very good, it says. Or thinks. But we share a common enemy in Olethia. Come to me.*

Weyna grows aware of throbbing in her fingers. Looking at her knuckles, she finds them white from gripping the hilts so hard. She forces herself to relax. She must make a decision.

I'm dying. You must hurry.

Tarrik has stated his willingness to seek the voice. And the voice helped save her once already. She owes it the same.

Quickly she sheathes her knives. She strides to the nearest door, grabbing her backpack along the way. She opens the door and the smells of wine hit her like a blast of wind. Wooden steps creak

as she descends into the cellar. The scents of these wines – reds, whites, pinks and gold – blend together, a perfume summoning memories of Mama's grape-stained fingers.

Weyna needs no light as she walks across the floor – she and Adrew used to play hide-and-find down here in the darkness. The other hatch rests at the far end of the cellar. When Papa built this place he thought it a good escape route in case of fire. Or Aberrates. It represents her best means to exit unnoticed.

She ascends these other stairs. Papa always took good care of the wine cellar, because it made Mama happy. Weyna pushes at the trap door. It opens with ease and in silence. A layer of dirt and grass rolls off the wood as starlight and cold wind wash over her.

Weyna climbs out, closes the door, and kicks the dirt and grass back over the hatch. She stands between a pair of brooding boulders, and the mountain waits less than ten yards away. She starts towards it.

"Lead on," she whispers.

After waiting and making certain that Olethia did not descend on the farmhouse with his departure, Tarrik returned to the cave, because Olethia had been listening when he said he would do this. A bit of searching soon uncovered fresh tracks, leading in a new direction, away from the farmhouse.

For a while he had humored Olethia and followed her trail. Leaving tracks following hers was a nice touch. But now Tarrik was heading back towards the farm, taking care to cover his return tracks – such a complicated game – so he could ready his ambush for Olethia.

Tarrik yawned as he walked. Exhaustion clawed at him with cement fingers, seeking to seal his eyelids together like bricks. When battle came, his blood would rise to the occasion. But now the mad giggles of the breeze were like sweet lullabies. A few more hours at most, then he could rest.

Begin his new life.

Weyna was right that there must be more to life than the hunt. But knowing this and remembering it were two different matters. At seven years old, he had hidden in the bushes while a pair of Sighters had blinded and afterwards butchered his parents. That same day he made a decision to dedicate his life to bounty hunting. While other children wielded their sticks for fun, for Tarrik it marked the beginning of his training.

Zaleen had later shown him there was more to life...and her death had left him wanting nothing to do with such things ever again. Or so he thought. How did one change after so long, especially when past efforts only rewarded him with further pain?

One day at a time. He must believe this, follow this method, or the monsters in his heart would claim him.

He took another step and stopped in surprise. He was here. Below him the farmhouse waited, golden candlelight leaking through the creases of the back door. Tarrik settled into a nook he had chosen during his earlier ascent. It afforded a view of the valley while providing cover – the perfect spot from which to spring his ambush.

Dropping into a crouch, he leaned against the mountain wall. Rest would do him well, even if he could not sleep. He shifted to a more comfortable position and fought down a tremendous yawn. Perhaps he would close his eyes, just for a moment...

The mountain is the outcast of its family. Smaller than its neighbors, it stands at the edge of the mountain range, encroaching upon the valley of Weyna's home by its lonesome self. Only a single ridge

connects it to the greater chain, and Aberrates avoid this mountain because it fails to provide enough protection from hunting parties.

"The enemy never expects you to live in its shadow," Papa used to say. "We're safe here."

He had been right for a long time. As Weyna traverses these rocky slopes again, with stars and moon lighting the path, she prays some of the old luck holds up. Shortly after leaving her home the voice had faded to a presence in her mind, as when she'd first experienced it. It has become her guide, directing her like a compass, that weird device a merchant once showed her at the harvest festival.

Her knowledge of the healing arts is small. Hopefully she can ease the man's pain before he dies. But before this she must learn what he knows. She must unravel this puzzle – how he contacts her, the meaning of her dream, how it connects to Olethia and how to defeat her.

Such answers are upon her. The presence hums like a bee in her mind, and when silver moonlight reveals the cave there is no doubting she has arrived. The grips on her knives tighten as she approaches. Winds laugh with the madness of jesters. From out of the cave death drifts to her, its stench so thick she could almost cut it. Her enhancing sense of smell makes this worse, of course, but there is no denying the truth. She hopes that she has enough time.

Sucking down a final breath of air, she enters the cave. First thing she notices the light. Weak and flickering, the lantern beckons from the far end of the cave, casting butterflies across the walls.

"Hello?" she calls. "It's – it's Weyna. I'm here." Water drips from stalactites, strikes the floor with silver-wet kisses. "Hello?"

In the corner with the light a mound stirs. Weyna starts towards it. She realizes this is the place from her dream. He must have been communicating from here all along. She sees blankets now – one piled over the next – and wild brown hair, with the face turned away. Death-stench fills her twitching nostrils and tickles her gagging throat, but the blankets rise and fall with shuddering life.

Weyna kneels and gently shakes the man's shoulder. "Please. I need to know –"

The man rolls towards her. Weyna chokes down a scream. If she had hackles they would rise into spikes. White film covers his eyes. His emaciated features are the hue of the albino. Redness enflames the rims of his nostrils and ears, and when he opens his mouth light dances over a ruby-red tongue.

"Graaghghhh," he says.

Weyna scrambles back from his outstretched hand, fighting the urge to stab it.

This is not a man anymore but a thing, a creature ravaged into a nightmare. How can this be the one from her thoughts? How can he help her?

"His name is Blem."

Weyna whirls towards the mouth of the cave. This time the scream wins free of her throat, and it bounces off the walls. Framed in the moonlight stands the Sighter. He has narrow hips and a barrel chest, long hair stirring in the breeze. His eyes are massive, moon-sized, blue centers burning like sapphires.

At Weyna's scream somehow these wide, wide eyes widen further, veins wriggling in his whites like worms. "Silence!" he hisses, and runs towards her.

"No! Stay back!"

Weyna stabs at his eyes but he catches her wrist. The knife clatters against the floor. She tries again with her other hand and the result proves the same.

"Silence," he says again. He spins her around. One arm wraps

around her waist and he clamps a hand over her mouth. "You must be quiet."

Weyna struggles harder, bucking as she kicks at his shins. Suddenly the creature wrenches her head to the side. Another few inches will kill her. Weyna tenses as the Sighter whispers in her ear.

"Weyna, I'm not going to hurt you. I'm not going to steal your sight. Despite what I am, I *am* your friend. Are you listening to me?" Weyna nods. "Good. I'm removing my hands now. Don't scream. You'll attract Aberrates. Ones less friendly."

The Sighter removes its hand and withdraws its arm from around her waist. Weyna backs off a few steps, staring.

"Don't meet my gaze," it says. "It's dangerous to your optic nerves."

Weyna doesn't understand all his words, but she averts her gaze. She doubts she could outrun this creature. Looking at the floor, she surreptitiously searches for her knives. Just in case. "How do you know my name?"

"Blem told me."

"He *told* you? I didn't think he could speak."

"He can't. He told me with his thoughts. He can read other people's minds. That's how he learned your name, and how he's been communicating with you." He pauses. "My name is Tolethion."

There. She has spotted one of her knives near the wall, half-sheathed in the darkness. She can probably reach it before the Sighter. She inches towards it. "Why are you holding him prisoner?"

"I'm taking *care* of him." Tolethion sounds offended.

Weyna pauses. "So he's your...friend?"

Blem moans and Weyna turns her attention back to him. Sweat dampens his features and twitches run across his face like spiders. "What's wrong with him?"

"He's a Deficient," says Tolethion.

The Sighter is making sport of her. Losing a single sense would not affect a person as it has...

The thought trails off as the truth hits home. "*All*?" she says, speaking to Tolethion's shadow on the wall. "He's had *all* his senses stolen?"

"All five. It takes a powerful toll on the body, which is why he looks like this."

She cannot fathom it, spending every second locked in darkness – no, more than darkness – cursed to unknowingness. A shudder passes through her as that hackle feeling again stirs the core of her being. "How?" she asks.

"Olethia."

Weyna forgets herself. She turns to the Sighter and sees his eyes. The blueness runs so deep and pure, swishes like water. So inviting...

Tolethion closes his eyes. "Look away."

She could snatch the knife now, plunge it into his breast. She *should*. This is a Sighter. An Aberrate. He is a plague and his death will cleanse the land that much more. Weyna turns back to his shadow. "Explain," she says.

"Blem was Olethia's experiment," he tells her. "She wanted to see what happened if a human was stripped of all his senses. So she recruited four others for her project: a Listener, a Taster, a Smeller, and a Sighter." Tolethion looses a breath. "I was the Sighter."

"You?" Weyna turns towards the Sighter but checks herself in time. She clenches her fists. Of course this creature would have stolen the sight of others. But it is different when his victim lies moaning several feet over. By sheer force of will she checks the fear and hatred that over the centuries has become inbred towards these creatures. "Go on," she says in clipped tones.

"We chose a healthy male," says Tolethion, "one in his prime years. We took him to a secluded forest and in under an hour we had stripped his senses bare. For several hours afterwards nothing happened."

Blem cries out and a fresh wave of corruption assails Weyna's nostrils. "Excuse me," says Tolethion, and kneels beside his friend. Weyna stands behind him, amazed as Aberrate tends human, wash-cloth dabbing the sweat off Blem's forehead.

"Weyna," says Tolethion. How strange that this creature addresses her by name. How strange that he has a name. Or that Olethia does. Weyna has never associated these beings with something so precious as identities.

"Yes?" she says.

"Tell me what happens when a human becomes a Deficient."

His tone suggests that she should know the answer. "Another sense will sharpen, to make up for the loss." The answer hits before she even thinks of the question. "So losing all his senses created another sense? This thought-sense?"

"Indeed," says Tolethion. "It brought about a sixth sense to compensate for the losses of the other five...telepathy."

"What?"

"Telepathy. The ability to both read thoughts and project your own, so others will hear them. It's an ancient term, from the times before my...people. I read about it in a book."

"You read?" No one has ever told her that Aberrates can read. "I don't read!"

"I can teach you." Impatience tinges his voice. "Later. Blem is nearly dead" – his voice catches – "and we still have much to discuss." Weyna nods dumbly and kneels beside Tolethion while he tends Blem.

"Several hours after we stole his senses," he continues, "we discovered his telepathic nature. Olethia believed we could use this to our advantage, and the rest of us agreed."

"So what happened? Why are you here?"

"He touched my thoughts," says Tolethion, "made me understand the suffering I was causing him and others, all to satisfy my cravings. So we escaped."

"You what?"

"We escaped. And just in time. Olethia killed the others while I was spiriting Blem away. Apparently she had decided to keep him all for herself."

Blem moans again and reaches towards Weyna. "Give him your hand," says Tolethion.

Weyna's heart knocks against her ribs. "Why?"

"He's been monitoring our conversation telepathically. He wishes to convey the rest of the story to you directly. He believes it's the only way to make you a believer in our cause."

Weyna reaches for his thin hand. Stops. "What will it be like?"

"There is no describing it...not with our mere five senses."

Once more she reaches for Blem's skeletal fingers. Stops again. "What is your cause?"

"Graaghhh." Blem beckons with his hand like a bird flapping its broken wing.

Weyna takes a breath, bracing herself as she would before entering the cold water of a cow pond. Then she takes her plunge, clasping finger bones wrapped in flesh as thin as falling leaves. Blem tightens his grasp. So does she...

And through the true unknown she travels through the Forest of Sighs. It is wintertime, the taste of snow carrying on the blowing winds. She knows these things because Tolethion has opened his mind

to her, letting her explore. She is still new to True Thought – which is how she labels this sense of hers – and so it is easiest to link with others when they submit to her probing.

It is also through True Thought that she knows Tolethion carries her in his powerful arms. It still frightens her, putting her life in the hands of a Sighter. He has already maimed a fifth of her. What's to stop him from killing her? No. She and Tolethion must trust each other or their mission will end in failure.

Or death.

The time approaches. She senses others drawing closer, their questions drumming against her mind like heavy rain. She imagines a thick fog, concentrates, and the thoughts fade to murmurs. Certain of the answer already, she probes at Tolethion's mind, gathering her information.

Yes, he speaks with his old clan. Time passes, how much she cannot tell; following these threads of conversation requires all her focus. She is probably sweating with the effort. At last the moment arrives. One of Tolethion's kinsmen steps forward, thoughts swirling with uncertainty. He is willing, though, so she reaches out. Touches his mind.

His instincts take hold and he fights against the truth she brings, denies the suffering he causes her species. But in the end he listens. Understands.

Weeps.

Others come to experience...and keep coming. Through her link with Tolethion, she is shocked to learn of a line. By the time she finishes her thoughts are slower than mud.

The following morning they leave behind a peaceable chaos, as the clan discusses how to proceed. The next day Tolethion takes them to another Sighter clan he has had dealings with. The results prove much the same.

Time passes.

More tribes are visited, usually Sighters but sometimes other breeds. A legend grows. A name is bestowed: Truth-Bringer. Some heed the message. But even those who don't let them leave in peace. It is progress, a beginning. Several times they visit human villages, but always they are chased off. It must be done through the Aberrates.

More time passes.

Olethia pursues them with bloodhound determination, and so far they have managed to stay ahead of her. But flight has drawn to its end. Despite the onset of True Thought, the body was never meant to live without its nature-given five. The constant stress of True Thought is shutting her systems down. She can sense it. So Tolethion has carried her to this cave, and now she waits for the final unknown...

Blem releases his grip. Weyna slumps but Tolethion catches her before she falls. "Now do you understand?" he asks.

"Yes," says Weyna. She would look into his eyes if she could. "I understand more than I ever imagined possible."

"And do you understand why Blem contacted you after he sensed your thoughts?"

Weyna takes an extra moment, working everything out. "I do. And I'll help." She knows now what she'll do with her life. "What about Tarrik?"

Tolethion hesitates. "He's a bounty hunter. We doubt he's interested."

"He spoke to Tarrik once."

"Only to rescue you. Beyond this we doubt he'd work with us, unless you could convince him to join forces against Olethia."

Olethia. Outside, the moon has changed position. She stands up. "I need to get back to Tarrik."

"Graaghhh."

Tolethion cocks his head, listening. Weyna dares to observe his profile. "What does he say?"

Tolethion's mouth compresses into a hard line. "Your friend is asleep on the mountainside."

"Asleep? You must be mistaken." His silence is her answer. But Tarrik has killed for her, kept her safe and alive. Now he needs her and there is nothing she can do. She bites hard on the inside of her lip. She feels the flowing warmth but fails to taste it. "We need to help him! If Olethia should find him he's dead."

"Grrraaghhh."

Tolethion's breath catches. "You're certain?"

Blem nods.

"What does he say?" Weyna asks.

"He's going to wake your friend," Tolethion says softly. "But it will cost him the last of his strength."

Before Weyna can say something, or even think it, Blem closes his white-filmed eyes. A peaceful sigh escapes his lips and his body relaxes. It all happens in seconds. Without asking, Weyna knows that Blem is dead. "Did it...work?"

Tolethion starts toward the exit. "We'll find out." His voice is wracked, like one who has lost his family. Weyna knows this feeling well. "Come," he says. "You'll tell me what I need to know along the way."

Tarrik bolted awake. A voice – *the* voice – had screamed in his thoughts. No words, just a keening that ripped through the veil of sleep. His gaze shot to the sky. He had been dozing less than an hour. The candlelight still burned in the farmhouse, and a quick inspection of the grounds revealed no sign of Olethia.

He was a fool for dozing. He had no idea why the voice had contacted him, but he owed it a debt twice over. Once this business was finished, he would find whoever this was and help in whatever way he could.

Shifting into a more uncomfortable position, Tarrik settled back to wait.

Dawn peeked over the mountains. A breeze wafted over the stones, stirring up dust. A woman strode through this newly made veil. She had blonde hair and a checkered skirt that accentuated her lean body. Pale skin helped emphasize her veins; the blue lines flowed everywhere, threading her like tattoos. Fingernails extended from her left hand, curving like claws, and sunlight glittered on their silver polish.

Carefully, she picked her way down the mountain, towards the farmhouse. As she drew closer, her clawless hand unsheathed the sword strapped between her shoulders. Once she stepped onto the valley floor, Tarrik stepped from behind his hiding place and fired his gun.

The air *cracked* and Olethia reacted, twisting so fast that the bullet lodged beneath her shoulder instead of through a lung. She grunted and whirled, the veins in her face writhing like serpents. Tarrik busied himself with reloading.

"Tarrik, my precious dearest," came her voice as he lifted the gun. His gaze traveled down the mountainside before settling back on Olethia. She stared back with a smile that matched her predatory posture. "It seems you kissed me first today."

Then she ran at him, feet pounding up the trail. Tarrik took aim, but she timed his attack perfectly, leaping to the side as he fired again. The bullet missed, and Olethia kept running, closing the distance fast. Tarrik hurled his knives. Without breaking stride, the

Feeler's arm blurred. Metallic clangs filled the air as she batted the blades aside.

By the time he unsheathed his sword Olethia had reached him. He brought the blade down with enough force to cleave her in twain. But she darted aside with the speed of a hummingbird, and once more her blade blurred, opening a dozen nicks on Tarrik's body. She made no attempt at the death stroke, as quick endings left little room for pain and suffering. So even now, with murder gleaming in her eyes, Tarrik knew she would string things out. It would be her doom.

"Death draws near," he said, missing with a thrust towards her heart. "Are you ready?"

Olethia laughed, her veins wriggling with pleasure. "Ask yourself." Her sword licked out and sliced into his thigh.

Blood spurted and Tarrik's leg crumpled. He hit the ground back first, and as he tumbled over earth and stones a grim smile spread over his lips. When he reached the valley floor he rolled to his knees at once. Laughter bubbled up his throat. Oh, how long he had been waiting for this. He climbed to his feet as Olethia approached, and with the blood running down his leg in twining rivers, he saluted her with his blade. "I'm going to skin your dead carcass." He said this happily. Conversationally. "Are you frightened? You should be."

Uncertainty spread over Olethia's face like a stain, and the veins in her face paused. Then she snarled as though upset with herself. She started circling him. "Your lover was one of my favorite takes. So much feeling. Kept me going a whole day. I wonder if this latest version has reservoirs so deep."

"Shut up."

His sword arced towards her neck. Olethia ducked with a casual motion and opened the calf of his other leg. Tarrik wobbled but kept his balance, hobbling as he turned in circles to keep her in sight.

"You can't win," she said. "*Humans* can't win. Not against Feelers. We're stronger." She nicked his shoulder with the tip of her sword. "Faster." His other shoulder. "Better. And when I'm finished with you, I'll hunt down the only human I need. Then I'll use him to see your race penned up like so much swine." This time she lashed out with her silver nails, opening a rip in Tarrik's shirt. Blood welled, and his nipple fell to the earth. "You're nothing but amusement to us, a wine for the tasting."

She expected him to show pain. Wanted it. She was so predictable. "You talk too much."

Olethia's veins writhed as if to burst from her skin. "That hat hides your beauty scratch." Her calm voice was at odds with her expression. "Let's give you something more visible, hmm?"

Her clawed hand streaked, blurred, and silver nails punctured his cheek. Tarrik bit down before she could withdraw her fingers, and their bloods mixed, a warm sea filling his mouth. Olethia screamed as she leapt back, yanking her hand free. She tried flexing her mutilated fingers, which curled about an inch before she hissed.

"You'll pay for that."

Tarrik spit out a pair of silver fingernails. "I'm waiting."

But instead of charging Olethia suddenly backed off and averted her gaze. Over his panting, Tarrik heard running footsteps. He whirled and the wide blue eyes of a Sighter barreled down on him. Immediately he shifted his gaze to the creature's chin and lashed out with his sword.

He caught the Sighter through its side and two screams cut the air. One belonged to the Sighter. The other was impossible.

"Tarrik!" Down the mountainside Weyna came running, arms outstretched. "No! He's on our side. He's...behind you!"

He dropped to his knees and the sword whiffed over his head. He tried to rise but his legs failed him and he crumpled to the earth. Olethia raised her sword to finish him, but then she reeled back, her sword dancing with another. And all Tarrik could do was sit dumbfounded while his world crumbled, as Sighter fought Feeler, one Aberrate protecting him from the other.

"Tarrik." Weyna knelt beside him while the creatures fought. Olethia had the advantage of speed, but the Sighter's gaze evened things out. "You're hurt," she said.

"Impossible," he mumbled. A Feeler had killed his lover. Sighters had killed his parents. They were *not* supposed to fight each other. They fought humans. Humans fought them. It was the order of things. There could be no peace. Ever.

"Impossible," he said again.

"Tarrik!" Dully he looked back to Weyna, too stunned to wonder any more about her presence outside. "The Sighter is on our side," she said. "He's the one from my dreams. He's our friend."

"Friend," he repeated. His gaze shifted back to the Aberrates. Around and around they danced, hurling epithets with every thrust of their blades. These creatures were parasites, interested in their own sick pleasures. They had killed everyone he had ever loved. *No Aberrate would ever be his friend.*

Suddenly his injured legs were standing. Then they were running, and he raised his sword to strike whichever of the combatants he reached first. Weyna shouted something, but the blood pounding through his skull dulled away the words.

With her maimed hand, Olethia lashed out. Two of her remaining nails punctured the Sighter's eyes. Blood squirted, and the creature fell to the ground screaming. Tarrik closed on Olethia –

Lightning fast she whirled, leaving blurred doubles in the air, and her steel ran him clean through the stomach. A thousand recollections flooded Tarrik's consciousness, most of them of childhood, when his parents had still been alive, and there had been more to life than the hunt. He had not hated Aberrates then. It had been so long ago he had almost forgotten.

Olethia grabbed the back of his head, jerking him close. She whispered in his ear. "You were always my favorite."

She twisted the steel and Tarrik clamped his hand over her wrist. "We're not finished," he whispered back.

Olethia's features widened with shock. "How –"

Tarrik rammed his sword through her stomach, choking off her words. Blood traced the contours of her lips before spilling down her chin. Together they dropped to their knees. Olethia brought her clawed hand to his mutilated cheek. "How?" she asked again.

"I can't feel," he said. Her mouth dropped. Blood gushed in a fresh waterfall. "I let a Feeler take my touch," he continued, "so I could kill you...seems it worked."

Olethia laughed, and a blood bubble exploded in Tarrik's face. "Clever." She wrapped her good hand around his throat. "But you die first."

"Wrong," said a voice behind her. A hand grabbed Olethia's hair, jerking her head backwards. The knife slid across her throat, opening a deep red smile, and the Feeler slumped to the earth.

Weyna rolled the corpse aside and dropped beside Tarrik. Weakly he turned his head. The Sighter lay unmoving. So did Olethia, her features locked in disbelief. Good. The hunt was done. At last he could rest.

"Now you know," he said. "Touching people...talking about it ... brought back...memories...painful..." He fell into a fit of coughing.

Weyna cradled his head. "Rest."

"I will," he answered. "Her hide..."

"I grew up on a pig farm and know how to butcher. It will be done."

And with that the music of death sang through his thoughts, tempting him more than any Listener could. Tarrik wondered if his soul would see his parents, if it would see Zaleen. He wondered if his soul would feel. Maybe the senses were prisons to living things, enslaving them to their desires. Perhaps death brought freedom. Perhaps he was delirious. The truth was coming. He tried to say farewell but found himself unable.

"Hush," Weyna told him.

Then she cupped his face and kissed him. The flavor of her moist tongue saturated his mouth, and Tarrik savored it down to his last ember of dimming life. Whatever waited in the hereafter, at least of one thing he could be certain: there was no sweeter taste.

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Tolethion is as foolish as he is stubborn. Despite Weyna's pleas for him to rest, he insists on helping dig Tarrik's grave. Eventually she relents, and with blood-soaked bandages binding his ribs and wrapped over his eyes, he helps open and afterwards fill the earth.

Weyna can feel fresh blisters forming on her fingers as she digs her fourth grave in less than a day. She has decided to bury Tarrik beside Adrew. Her brother would like that – he had admired bounty hunters. As she and Tolethion drop mounds of dirt on Tarrik's peaceful expression, she thinks of all that has happened since she met this man. Again and again she comes back to what he told her: *There are ways if one is willing.*

Weyna is willing. She and Tolethion will find a way. She will have to take care of him, but this somehow feels right. And now they can approach humans. They will start with the village where Papa bought the grapes. The people know her. They will hear what she has to say.

Tolethion is panting. Fresh blood stains his bandages. "Enough," she says. "We're finished."

"Are we?" He pokes at the half-filled hole with his shovel. "There is work yet to do."

Weyna takes the shovel from his hands. "We'll finish later. Both of us need to rest."

Tolethion appears ready to argue. Instead his shoulders slump and he nods. "Later." Blood leaks down his cheeks.

Weyna leaves the shovels and takes Tolethion's arm. As she guides him towards the farmhouse, she mentally ticks off what must be done before she sleeps. Change Tolethion's bandages and see him to bed. Wait for him to sleep. Finish burying Tarrik. Skin Olethia and leave the rest to the crows, which is better than she deserves.

Then she can sleep. Afterwards she will be nurse Tolethion as best as she can, for as long as it takes. When he is recovered their work will begin.

"Weyna?"

"Yes, Tolethion?"

His Adam's apple bobs several times. "My eyes are hurting very badly."

Weyna pats his hand. "I'll change your bandages. Then I'll give you some wine."

"Wine, eh?" He sounds skeptical. "I'm picky about vintages. Will I like it?"

"Probably." A wistful smile spreads over her face. "Probably." ☆

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))) ACK-ACK MACAQUE))) GARETH LYN POWELL

I spent the first three months of last year living with a half-Japanese girl called Tori in a split-level flat above a butcher's shop on Gloucester Road. It was more my flat than hers. There wasn't much furniture. We slept on a mattress in the attic, beneath four skylights. There were movie posters on the walls, spider plants and glass jars of dried pasta by the kitchen window. I kept a portable typewriter on the table and there were takeaway menus and yellowing taxi cards pinned to a corkboard by the front door. On a still night, there was music from the Internet café across the street.

Tori had her laptop set up by the front window. She wrote and drew a web-based anime about a radioactive short-tailed monkey called Ack-Ack Macaque. He had an anti-aircraft gun and a patch over one eye. He had a cult online following. She spent hours hunched over each frame, fingers tapping on the mouse pad.

I used to sit there, watching her. I kept the kettle hot, kept the sweet tea coming. She used to wear my brushed cotton shirts and mutter under her breath.

We had sex all the time. One night, after we rolled apart, I told her I loved her. She just kind of shrugged; she was restless, eager to get back to her animation. "Thanks," she said.

She had shiny brown eyes and a thick black ponytail. She was shorter than me and wore combat trousers and skater T-shirts. Her left arm bore the twisted pink scar of a teenage motor scooter accident.

We used to laugh. We shared a sense of humour. I thought that we got each other, on so many levels. We were both into red wine and tapas. We liked the same films, listened to the same music. We stayed up late into the night, talking and drinking.

And then, one day in March, she walked out on me.

And I decided to slash my wrists.

I've no idea why I took it so hard. I don't even know if I meant to succeed. I drank half a bottle of cheap vodka from the corner shop, and then I took a kitchen knife from the drawer and made three cuts across each wrist. The first was easy, but by the second my hands had started to shake. The welling blood made the plastic knife handle slippery and my eyes were watering from the stinging pain. Nevertheless, within minutes, I was bleeding heavily. I dropped the knife in the bathroom sink and staggered downstairs.

Her note was still on the kitchen table, where she'd left it. It was full of clichés: she felt I'd been stifling her; she'd met someone else; she hadn't meant to, but she hoped I'd understand.

She hoped we could still be friends.

I picked up the phone. She answered on the fifth ring. "I've cut my wrists," I said. She didn't believe me; she hung up.

It was four-thirty on a damp and overcast Saturday afternoon. I felt restless; the flat was too quiet and I needed cigarettes. I picked up my coat. Outside, it was blisteringly cold; there was a bitter wind and the sky looked bruised.

"Twenty Silk Cut, please."

The middle-aged woman in the corner shop looked at me over her thick glasses. She wore a yellow sari and lots of mascara. "Are you all right, love?" She pushed the cigarettes across the counter. I forced a smile and handed her a stained tenner. She held it between

finger and thumb. She said: "Is this blood?"

I shrugged. I felt faint. Something cold and prickly seemed to be crawling up my legs. My wrists were still bleeding; my sleeves were soaked and sticky. There were bright red splatters on my grubby white trainers.

She looked me up and down, and curled her lip. She shuffled to the rear of the shop and pulled back a bead curtain, revealing a flight of dingy wooden stairs that led up into the apartment above.

"Sanjit!" she screeched. "Call an ambulance!"

Ack-Ack Macaque rides through the red wartime sky in the Akron, a gold-plated airship towed by twelve hundred skeletal oxen. With his motley crew, he's the scourge of the Luftwaffe, a defender of all things right and decent.

Between them, they've notched up more confirmed kills than anyone else in the European theatre. They've pretty much cleared the Kaiser's planes from the sky; all except those of the squadron belonging to the diabolical Baron Von Richter-Scale.

They've tracked each other from the Baltic Sea to the Mediterranean and back. Countless times, they've crossed swords in skies above the battlefields and trenches of Northern Europe, but to no avail.

"You'll never stop me, monkey boy!" cackles the Baron.

They kept me in hospital for three days. When I got out, I tried to stay indoors. I took a leave of absence from work. My bandaged wrists began to scab over. The cuts were black and flaky. The stitches itched. I became self-conscious. I began to regret what I'd done. When I ventured out for food, I tried to hide the bandages. I felt no one understood; no one saw the red raw mess that I'd become. Not even Tori.

"I did it for you," I said.

She hung up, as always. But before she did, in the background, I heard Josh, her new boyfriend, rattling pans in the kitchen.

I'd heard that he was the marketing director of an up-and-coming software company based in a converted warehouse by the docks. He liked to cook Thai food. He wore a lot of denim and drove an Audi.

I went to see him at his office.

"You don't understand her work," I said.

He took a deep breath. He scratched his forehead. He wouldn't look at my hands; the sight of my bandages embarrassed him.

"The manga monkey thing?" he said. "I think that's great but, you know, there's so much more potential there."

I raised my eyebrows. "Ack-Ack Macaque's a fucking classic."

He shook his head slowly. He looked tired, almost disappointed by my lack of vision. "It's a one joke thing," he said. He offered me a seat, but I shook my head. "We're developing the whole concept," he continued. "We're going to flesh it out, make it the basis for a whole product range. It's going to be huge." He tapped a web address into his desktop, and turned the screen my way. An animated picture of the monkey's face appeared, eye patch and all. "See this? It's a virtual online simulation that kids can interact with."

I stared at it in horror. It wasn't the character I knew and loved. They'd lost the edginess, made it cute, given it a large, puppy dog eye and a goofy grin. All the sharp edges were gone.

Josh rattled a few keys. "If you type in a question, it responds; it's



great. We've given it the ability to learn from its mistakes, to make its answers more convincing. It's just like talking to a real person."

I closed my eyes. I could hear the self-assurance in his voice, his unshakable self-belief. I knew right then that nothing I could say would sway him. There was no way to get through to him. He was messing up everything I loved – my relationship with Tori, and my favourite anime character – and I was powerless in the face of his confidence. My throat began to close up. Breathing became a ragged effort. The walls of the office seemed to crowd in on me. I fell into a chair and burst into embarrassed sobs.

When I looked up, angrily wiping my eyes on my sleeve, he was watching me. "You need to get some counselling," he said.

I took to wearing sunglasses when I went out. I had a paperback copy of *The Invisible Man* on my bookshelves and I spent a lot of time looking at the bandaged face on the cover.

April came and went. Ashamed and restless, I left the city and went back to the dismal Welsh market town where I'd grown up. I hid for a couple of months in a terraced bed and breakfast near the railway station. At night, the passing trains made the sash windows shake. By day, rain pattered off the roof and dripped from the gutters. Grey mist streaked the hills above the town, where gorse bushes huddled in the bracken like a sleeping army.

I'd come seeking comfort and familiarity but discovered instead the kind of notoriety you only find in a small community. I'd become an outsider, a novelty. The tiniest details of my daily activities were a constant source of fascination to my elderly neighbours. They were desperate to know why I wore bandages on my arms; they were like sharks circling, scenting something in the water. They'd contrive to meet me by the front door so they could ask how I was. They'd skirt around a hundred unspoken questions, hoping to glean a scrap of scandal. Even in a town where half the adult population seemed to exhibit one kind of debilitating medical condition or another, I stood out.

The truth was, I didn't really need the bandages any more. But they were comforting, somehow. And I wasn't ready to give them up.

Every Friday night, I called Tori from the payphone at the end of the street, by the river. "I miss you," I said. I pressed the receiver against my ear, listening to her breathe. And then I went back to my empty little room and drank myself to sleep.

Meanwhile, Ack-Ack Macaque went from strength to strength. He got his own animated Saturday morning TV series. There was even talk of a movie. By August, the wisecracking monkey was everywhere. And the public still couldn't get enough of him. They bought his obnoxious image on T-shirts and calendars. There were breakfast cereals, screensavers, ring tones and lunchboxes. His inane catchphrases entered the language. You could hardly go anywhere without hearing some joker squeak out: "Everybody loves the monkey."

My blood ran cold every time I heard it. It was *my* phrase; she'd picked it up from me. It was something I used to say all the time, back when we lived together, when we were happy. It was one of our private jokes, one of the ways I used to make her laugh. I couldn't believe she'd recycled it. I couldn't believe she was using it to make money. And it hurt to hear it shouted in the street by kids who only knew the cute cartoon version. They had no idea how good the original anime series had been, how important. They didn't care about its irony or satire – they just revelled in the sanitised slapstick of the new episodes.

I caught the early train back to Bristol. I wanted to confront her. I wanted to let her know how betrayed I felt. But then, as I watched the full moon set over the flooded Severn Estuary, I caught my reflection in the carriage window.

I'd already tried to kill myself. What else could I do?

When we pulled in at Bristol Parkway, I stumbled out onto the station forecourt in the orange-lit, early morning chill. The sky in the east was dirty grey. The pavements were wet; the taxis sat with their heaters running. After a few moments of indecision, I started walking. I walked all the way to Tori's new bedsit. It was early September and there was rain in the air. I saw a fox investigating some black rubbish sacks outside a kebab shop. It moved more like a cat than a dog, and it watched me warily as I passed.

The Akron carries half a dozen propeller-driven biplanes. They're launched and recovered using a trapeze that can be raised and lowered from a hangar in the floor of the airship. Ack-Ack uses them to fly solo scouting missions, deep into enemy territory, searching for the Baron's lair.

Today, he's got a passenger.

"He's gotta be here somewhere," shouts Lola Lush over the roar of the Rolls Royce engine. Her pink silk scarf flaps in the wind. She's a plucky American reporter with red lips and dark, wavy hair. But Ack-Ack doesn't reply. He's flying the plane with his feet while he peels a banana. He's wearing a thick flight jacket and a leather cap.

Below them, the moonlight glints off a thousand steam-driven allied tanks. Like huge tracked battleships, they forge relentlessly forward, through the mud, toward the German lines. Black clouds shot with sparks belch from their gothic smokestacks. In the morning, they'll fall on Paris, driving the enemy hordes from the city.

The streetlights on her road were out. She opened the door as if she'd been expecting me. She looked pale and dishevelled in an old silk dressing gown. She'd been crying; her eyes were bloodshot and puffy. "Oh, Andy." She threw her arms around my neck and rubbed her face into my chest. Her fingers were like talons.

I took her in and sat her down. I made her a cup of tea and waited patiently as she tried to talk. Each time, she got as far as my name, and then broke down again. "He's left me," she sobbed.

I held her as her shoulders shook. She cried like a child, with no restraint or dignity.

I went to her room and filled a carrier bag with clothes. Then I took her back to my flat, the one we used to share, and put her to bed in the attic, beneath the skylights. The room smelled stale because I'd been away so long.

Lying on her side beneath the duvet, she curled her arms around her drawn-up knees. She looked small and vulnerable, skinnier than I remembered. "Andy?" she whispered.

"Yes, love?"

She licked her lips. "What do your arms look like, under the bandages?" I flinched away, embarrassed. She pushed her cheek into the pillow and started to cry again. "I'm so sorry," she sniffed. "I'm so sorry for making you feel like this."

I left her there and went down to the kitchen. I made coffee and sat at the kitchen table, in front of the dusty typewriter. Outside, another wet morning dawned.

I lit a cigarette and turned on the television, with the volume low. There wasn't much on. Several channels were running test cards and the rest were given over to confused news reports. After a couple of minutes, I turned it off.

At a quarter past six, her mobile rang. I picked it up. It was Josh and he sounded rough. "I've got to talk to her," he said. He sounded surprised to hear my voice.

"No way." I was standing by the window; it was raining.

"It's about the monkey," he said. "There's a problem with it."

I snorted. He'd screwed Tori out of her rights to the character. As soon as it started bringing in serious money, he'd dumped her.

I said: "Go to hell, Josh." I turned the phone off and left it by the kettle. Out on the street, a police siren tore by, blue lights flashing. I mashed out my cigarette and went for a shower.

Tori came downstairs as I took my bandages off. I think the phone must've woken her. I tried to turn away, but she put a hand on my arm. She saw the raised, red scars. She reached up and brushed my cheek. Her eyes were sad and her chest seemed hollow. She'd been crying again. "You're beautiful," she said. "You've suffered, and it's made you beautiful."

There wasn't any food in the house. I went down to the shop on the corner but it was closed. The Internet café over the road was open, but empty. All the monitors displayed error messages.

The girl at the counter sold me tea and sandwiches to take out.

"I think the main server's down," she said.

When I got back to the flat, I found Tori curled on the sofa, watching an episode of the animated Ack-Ack Macaque series on DVD. She wore a towel and struggled with a comb. I took it from her and ran it gently through her wet hair, teasing out the knots. The skin on her shoulders smelled of soap. "I don't like the guy they got in to do Baron Von Richter-Scale's voice," she said.

"Too American?"

"Too whiny."

I finished untangling her hair and handed the comb back. "Why are you watching it?" I asked.

She shrugged, her attention fixed on the screen. "There's nothing else on."

"I bought sandwiches."

"I'm not hungry."

I handed her a plastic cup of tea. "Drink this, at least."

She took it and levered up the lid. She sniffed the steam. I went out into the kitchen and lit another cigarette. My hands were shaking.

When I got off the train last night, I'd been expecting a confrontation. I'd been preparing myself for a fight. And now all that unused anger was sloshing around, looking for an outlet.

I stared at the film posters on the walls. I sorted through the pile of mail that had accumulated during my absence. I stood at the window and watched the rain. "This isn't fair," I said, at last.

I scratched irritably at my bandages. When I looked up, Tori stood in the doorway, still wrapped in the towel. She held out her arm. The old scar from the scooter accident looked like a twisted claw mark in her olive skin. "We're both damaged," she said.

About an hour later, the intercom buzzed. It was Josh. "Please, you've got to let me in," he pleaded. His voice was hoarse; he sounded scared. I hung up. He pressed the buzzer again. He started pounding on the door. I looked across at Tori and said: "It's your decision."

She bit her lip. Then she closed her eyes and nodded. "Let him in."

He looked a mess. He wore a denim shirt and white Nike jogging bottoms under a flapping khaki trench coat. His hair was wild, spiky with yesterday's gel, and he kept clenching and unclenching his fists. "It's the fucking monkey," he said.

Tori sucked her teeth. "What about it?" She was dressed now, in blue cargo pants and a black vest.

"Haven't you been watching the news?" He lunged forward and snatched the remote from the coffee table. Many of the cable channels were messy with interference. Some of the smaller ones were off the air altogether. The BBC was still broadcasting, but the sound was patchy. There was footage of burning buildings, riots, and looting. There were troops on the streets of Berlin, Munich and Paris.

I asked: "What's this?"

He looked at me with bloodshot eyes. "It's the monkey," he replied.

We sat together on the sofa, watching the disaster unfold. And as each station sputtered and died, we flicked on to the next. When the last picture faded, I passed around the cigarettes. Josh took one, Tori declined. Out in the street, there were more sirens.

"You remember the online simulation? When we designed it, we didn't anticipate the level of response," he said.

I leaned forward, offering him a light. "So, what happened?"

He puffed his Silk Cut into life and sat back in a swirl of smoke. He looked desperately tired. "There were literally thousands of people on the site at any one time. They played games with it, tried to catch it out with trick questions. It was learning at a fantastic rate."

"Go on," I said.

"Well, it wasn't designed for that kind of intensity. It was developing faster than we'd anticipated. It started trawling other websites for information, raiding databases. It got everywhere."

Tori walked over to the TV. She stood in front of it, shifting her weight from one foot to the other. "So, why hasn't this happened before? They've had similar programs in the States for months. Why's this one gone wrong?"

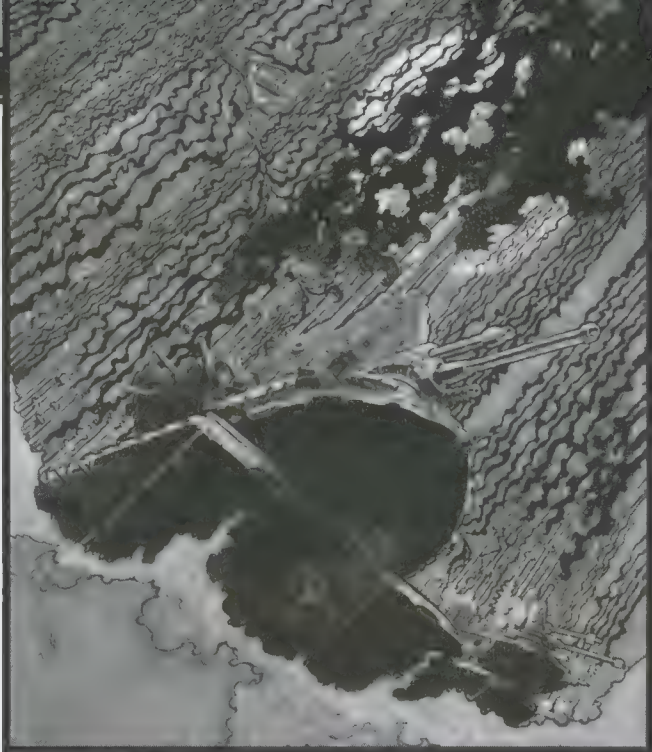
He shook his head. "Those were mostly on academic sites. None of them had to contend with the kind of hit rates we were seeing."

"So, what happened?" I asked.

He looked miserable. "I guess it eventually reached some critical level of complexity. Two days ago, it vanished into cyberspace, and it's been causing trouble ever since."

I thought about the error messages on the monitors in the café, and the disrupted TV stations. I sucked in a lungful of smoke. "Everybody loves the monkey," I said.

There were a handful of local and national radio stations still broadcasting. Over the next hour, we listened as the entity formerly known as Ack-Ack Macaque took down the Deutsche Bank. It wiped billions off the German stock exchange and sent the international currency



markets into freefall.

"It's asserting itself," Josh said. "It's flexing its muscles."

Tori sat on the bottom of the stairs that led up to the attic. Her head rested against the bannister. "How could you let this happen?" she asked.

Josh surged to his feet, coat flapping. He bent over her, fists squeezed tight. She leaned back, nervous. He seemed to be struggling to say something. He gave up. He let out a frustrated cry, turned his back and stalked over to the window. Tori closed her eyes. I went over and knelt before her. I put a hand on her shoulder; she reached up and gripped it. I said: "Are you okay?"

She glanced past me, at Josh. "I don't know," she said.

.....
They engage the Baron's planes in the skies over France. There's no mistaking the Baron's blue Fokker D.VII with its skull and crossed-bones motif. The Akron launches its fighters and, within seconds, the sky's a confusing tangle of weaving aircraft.

In the lead plane, Ack-Ack Macaque stands up in his cockpit, blasting away with his handheld cannon. His yellow teeth are bared, clamped around the angry red glow of his cigar.

In the front seat, Lola Lush uses her camera's tripod to swipe at the black-clad ninjas that leap at them from the enemy planes. Showers of spinning shurikens clatter against the wings and tail.

The Baron's blue Fokker dives toward them out of the sun, on a collision course. His machine guns punch holes through their engine cowling. Hot oil squirts back over the fuselage. Lola curses.

Ack-Ack drops back into his seat and wipes his goggles. He seizes the joystick. If this is a game of chicken, he's not going to be the first to flinch. He spits his oily cigar over the side of the plane and wipes his mouth on his hairy arm. He snarls: "Okay, you bastard. This time we finish it."

.....
The first two planes to crash were Lufthansa airliners, and they went down almost simultaneously, one over the Atlantic and the other on approach to Heathrow. The third was a German military transport that flew into the ground near Kiev.

Most of the radio reports were vague, or contradictory. The only confirmed details came from the Heathrow crash, which they were blaming on a computer glitch at air traffic control. We listened in silence, stunned at the number of casualties.

"There's a pattern here," I said.

Josh turned to face us. He seemed calmer but his eyes glistened. "Where?"

"Lufthansa. The Deutsche Bank. The Berlin stock exchange..." I counted them off on my fingers.

Tori stood up and started pacing. She said: "It must think it really is Ack-Ack Macaque."

Josh looked blank. "Okay. But why's it causing planes to crash?"

Tori stopped pacing. "Have you ever actually *watched* the original series?"

He shrugged. "I looked at it, but I still don't get the connection."

I reached for a cigarette. "He's looking for someone," I said.

"Who?"

"His arch-enemy, the German air ace Baron Von Richter-Scale."

Tori stopped pacing. She said: "That's why all those planes were German. He's trying to shoot down the Baron. It's what he does in every episode."

Josh went pale. "But we based his behaviour on those shows."

I said: "I hope you've got a good lawyer."

He looked indignant. "This isn't my fault."

"But you own him, you launched the software. You're the one they're going to come after." I blew smoke in his direction. "It serves you right for stealing the copyright."

Tori shushed us. "It's too late for that," she said.

The TV had come back on. Someone, somewhere, had managed to lash together a news report. There was no sound, only jerky, amateur footage shot on mobile phones. It showed two airliners colliding over Strasbourg, a cargo plane ditching in the Med, near Crete. Several airports were burning. And then it shifted to pictures of computer screens in offices, schools, and control towers around the world. All of them showed the same grinning monkey's face.

I pushed past Josh and opened the window. Even from here, I could see the same face on the monitors in the café across the road. There was a thick pall of black smoke coming from the city centre. Sirens howled. People were out in the street, looking frightened.

I turned back slowly and looked Tori in the eye. I started unwinding my bandages, letting them fall to the floor in dirty white loops.

I said: "I don't care about any of this. I just want you back."

She bit her lip. Her hand went to her own scar. She opened and closed her mouth several times. She looked at the TV, and then dropped her eyes. "I want you too," she said.

.....
The Baron's burning plane hits the hillside and explodes. Lola Lush cheers and waves a fist over her head, but Ack-Ack Macaque says nothing. He circles back over the burning wreck and waggles his wings in salute to his fallen foe. And then he pulls back hard on the joystick and his rattling old plane leaps skyward, high over the rolling hills and fields of the French countryside. Ahead, the Akron stands against the sunset like a long, black cigar. Its skeletal oxen paw the air, anxious to get underway.

Lola's lips are red and full; her cheeks are flushed. She shouts: "What are you gonna do now?"

He pushes up his goggles and gives her a toothy grin. The air war may be over, but he knows he'll never be out of work. The top brass will always want something shot out of the sky. "When we get back, I'm going to give you the night of your young life," he says, "and then in the morning, I'm going to go out and find myself another war." ✨

This is Gareth's second story in *Interzone*. 'The Last Reef' appeared in issue 202 and is now available to read on our website at ttopress.com. A collection of Gareth's short fiction will be published by Elastic Press in 2008. Further details can be found at garethllynpowell.blogspot.com

a handful



of pearls

BETH BERNOBICH

It was said in holy tales that the world came to be when Ane-ne fell into from a precipitance offered to him by the Mahe-god, Gmuby, for its sweetness. Ane-ne ate the fruit in a single gulp, only to discover the Mahe-god had filled it with poison. He roared and ground and boozed up the mountains. He roared and ground and ground and ground forth the oceans. When the sickness at last faded from his belly, Ane-ne spat upon the ocean to show his contempt for the Mahe-god's evil tricks. And from every drop of spittle there appeared an island.

Three dark smudges broke the endless green horizon, just below the faint white discs of the twin moons. Yan Dei leaned over the ship's rail and squinted through the warm ocean spray. The sun was just slanting behind the expedition ships, and the waters ran red and silver from the liquid sunset. Between the mist and the approaching twilight, it was hard to make out if those were storm clouds rising above the waves, or if at last they had reached –

"Land!" a crew member called out. "Land, ho!"

Almost immediately, a clamor broke out behind Yan – shouts and laughter and delighted cries. Half the crew, those not strictly on duty, and all the scientists crowded the decks, everyone chattering excitedly. Yan squeezed his way from their midst and took refuge behind the ladder to the upper decks. Here the ship's metal skin hummed as the electric engines shifted into a lower gear. A hot tinny smell rolled up from below decks, making his stomach heave.

Hari Dun strolled over to Yan. "Not interested?"

"Hard to breathe in that mob," Yan said shortly.

His friend smiled. "Understandable." He glanced toward the ship's bow, which was hardly visible through the hordes. "And I can't blame them. It's been a long voyage. Give them another few minutes, and Doctor Mar will have them back at their posts. Then we can get a glimpse ourselves."

A ripple of movement passed through the crowds, and those nearest Yan and Hari pressed back as Bej Saihan, the expedition's lead tracker, shouldered his way toward the bow. He paused, standing head and shoulders above everyone else, and scanned all points of the horizon, seemingly unaware of the small clearing that formed around him. As Bej swiveled his massive head around, Yan caught a glimpse of the man's blunt features.

Not quite a man, or so the rumors claimed.

Bej's massive jaw and squashed nose looked crude, unfinished, as though someone had haphazardly shaped his features from a muddy lump of clay. It was said in whispers that Bej counted the *pemburu* among his ancestors. That Kun Mar had rescued the man from prison, and had given him jobs that used his uncanny hunting skills. The *pemburu* were the hunters – half-cousins to humans – and looking at Bej's face, Yan could easily imagine him in a jungle, or in the ruined coastal cities, where a few pockets of *pemburu* survived.

Now Kun Mar, the senior biologist and expedition leader, strode into view. "Back to your posts," he shouted. "We'll see land soon enough. Team leaders, I'd like to see all of you in the main boardroom. Now."

The crowds quickly scattered. Yan expected Hari to go immediately – he was the senior biochemist for the expedition – but Hari went forward to the rails and lingered a few moments, gazing southward. "The pearls of the southeast," he murmured. "So the poets called them. I like the old legends better, myself."

"Spittle from the heavens," Yan said, wrinkling his nose. "I know the tales."

Hari grinned. "Do not despise them, my friend. Spittle and vomit are the working tools of the scientist. And from these we will make pearls." The grin faded, and his eyes narrowed to a speculative look as he studied the horizon. "Six months of paradise," he said quietly. "Six months of discovery and exploration, masquerading as hard work. Hmmmm. I think I smell land. Can you?"

Yan took a tentative sniff, then a deeper one. Yes, just beneath the heavy salt tang, he detected a sharp biting scent that reminded him of crushed leaves. "Trees and bark and mud and swamp."

"Shit and musk and old rotting things."

"Hah. You can't smell all that."

Hari laughed quietly. "No. Only Bej Saihan could claim that ability. But soon – tomorrow at the latest – you and I both will. And like the lucky seventh son in the folk tales, let us hope we can turn all the shit we find into gold." He pushed off from the rails. "Well, I best go before Kun starts bellowing. Take care, Yan."

Yan nodded. He had not missed Hari's subtle hints. Work hard. Be a good member of the team. Even that comment about shit and gold meant something, for that was the point of this expedition, a joint venture between XiangGen Pharmaceuticals and the Tai Jing Federal Council on Scientific Research. If their research led to even one medical breakthrough, it meant acclaim for every member of this expedition.

Or even just a second chance, Yan thought. With his department head at the University. With Meh.

He smacked both palms against the railing. *Not my fault. Not –*

Yan clamped his lips shut and glanced around. Slowly he let his breath trickle out. Good. No one had seen that tiny outburst. It would not do to make the wrong impression. Not here where every interaction found its way into the official reports. Best to forget Meh. His future lay just ahead, within those islands.

He turned his attention back to the horizon. In just the past few moments, the bumps and smudges had turned into distinct masses, like a handful of mismatched pearls, scattered by the gods over the far seas. He could even make out a jagged peak that might be a volcano. Above them, the twin moons stood out sharper against the evening sky, and a spray of pale stars emerged. A creaking sound vibrated through the air, as the ship's solar sails folded for the night.

Yan flexed his hands and breathed in deep lungfuls of the ocean air. The smell of crushed leaves was stronger now, mixed with the unmistakable scent of rotting fish. A strange paradise, indeed.

The tightness in his gut eased. *This time I will not stumble.*

.....
The expedition's three ships navigated cautiously past the rocks and shoals that ringed the island chain. Their first destination was a shallow harbor belonging to the island designated as XTI-19S137W-1A.

Using maps from the earlier survey teams, Kun Mar and his advisors chose a level site beside a wide swift-running stream, half a klick inland. For the next five days, the crews cleared away the brush, dug trenches, and transported crates of equipment from the ships. By the sixth morning, a miniature settlement existed where before only scrub trees grew. Various technicians still worked to set up the laboratory equipment, but the main work was complete. The other ships withdrew their crews and began preparations for their departure.

Yan spent most of the day transferring the last of his belongings from the ship and setting up his sleeping tent. Late that afternoon, he joined the rest of the microbiology team at their lab site, which occupied the southern quadrant of the camp.

"You will work in pairs," Doctor Au told them. "Each senior member will be assigned a junior partner. A teaching partnership, if you will. We are here to find practical applications, but Doctor Mar tells me there is no rule against expanding our knowledge – as long as we do our work."

Smiles on several faces. A few laughed dutifully.

"We start work tomorrow," Au went on. "You've read the materials and reports, and you know my ideas for how to approach our task. So. For the rest of today, I suggest you familiarize yourself with our immediate surroundings. You will not have the leisure for that later. At least I hope not."

More laughter and some obvious delight at being released, if only for the afternoon. Doctor Au handed out slips of paper with the partner assignments. Yan read the name *Lian Luo*. One of the graduate students from the State University, he remembered. He had come across her once or twice aboard the ship, always in the company of other students. He glanced around and found her sitting with a few friends, all students and technicians, discussing their assignments. Easy enough to read her thoughts, though she greeted him politely when he approached her.

"You are stuck with me," he said. "Sorry about that."

Lian offered him a tentative smile. "Don't be. I hope to learn a lot from you, Doctor Dei."

She was a pretty girl. Long wispy dark hair, barely contained by her hair clips. Narrow eyes canted above delicate cheekbones. He smiled back, in what he hoped was a pleasant manner. "We can learn from each other."

An awkward pause followed. Lian gave him another quick smile. "Well. I must go and see about my tent. If you will excuse me."

The rest of the team went their separate ways. Yan returned to his sleeping quarters. He unpacked a few items, then stowed his trunk out of sight. A dozen books and several photographs of his parents and two brothers made his small bookshelf look less empty. He wished he still had photos of Meh, but she had removed them all from their apartment.

My apartment, he corrected himself automatically.

Once theirs together.

Yan closed his eyes. The air pulsed against his skin, making his head throb. Steady, he told himself. It was the heat, the tent's closeness, the excitement of landing. That was all. Nothing to worry about.

He escaped his tent and took himself to Hari's new headquarters, where he found a dozen technicians checking rows of vials against their printed labels. Hari and his senior assistant, Che Lok were bent over one of the worktables, reviewing stacks of reports.

Hari glanced up. "Yan!" he exclaimed. "Excellent. Please rescue me from my too-vigilant assistant, Doctor Lok. You do know each other, no?"

Che was a tall angular young woman. Afraid of looking pretty, Yan thought, taking in her severe, tight braid and lack of makeup. He already knew about her from Hari's frequent references. Che had just earned her doctoral degree, and Hari had hand-picked her for this expedition.

Che met Yan's gaze briefly. A slight crease appeared between her brows. "We've met."

"We did?" Yan said. "Was that on board ship?"

Che glanced at Hari and shrugged. "Where else?"

Yan had no answer to that. He turned to Hari. "I'm hardly making a rescue. Are you busy, or would you like to take an early dinner?"

"Hmmm. Not too busy. A walk first, old friend. Or perhaps walk and dinner at the same time. After all, Doctor Lok has our lab well under control."

At the second mention of her new degree, Che's smile became genuine. "You are too kind."

"Never," Hari cried. "Doctor Mar emphasized that we are to be hard, cruel taskmasters. To that end, would you please check over the reagents? And have the technicians unpack the larger beakers and pipes. We shall want to run some preliminary tests tomorrow morning."

"I won't keep him too long," Yan said to Che.

Che gave him a cryptic look, but did not reply. Yan hesitated, thinking he should say something more, but Hari was already propelling him out of the tent.

At the kitchen compound, they selected a handful of self-heating food packs and headed down the beach. Several groups made picnics by the stream's mouth, but further along, they found themselves alone, treading a curving, looping path between the seas and vegetation. Quiet settled around them, broken only by the hush, hush, hush of the waves. Ahead, the shore stretched, an untouched expanse of pale green sands made of tiny particles of semi-precious stones that glittered in the fading sunlight. A short distance out, their ship stood out against the violet skies, its solar sails folded like awkward wings. Lights from the portholes winked on and off. A faint hum from the electric motors rippled over the water.

"I love this time of the day," Hari said softly. "It's as though we are walking through borders. Sunlight and moonlight. One day and the next. The rules are different at twilight, the old folk tales say. A magical hour when we might accomplish anything."

"Are you talking about miracles?" Yan asked.

"Practical ones," Hari answered. "A drug to cure senility. A fuel more powerful than coal or sunlight, and more plentiful than oil. Even an engine that lets us fly to the stars. You might laugh, Yan, but someday we will."

"Someday," Yan said, though he wondered at Hari's sudden pensive mood.

A massive man-like shadow erupted from the sands, not ten meters ahead. Yan started, then recognized Bej Saihan. He glanced toward Hari. Hari touched Yan's arm with a light hand, but he had not shifted his gaze from Bej. Interesting. So Yan was not the only person unsettled by the tracker.

Bej seemed not to notice them, or he didn't care. He tilted his head back and breathed audibly, as though tasting the air. Yan could not restrain a shudder. It was said the *pemburu* were Ame-no's dogs, shaped before he made humans. They were the god's hunters, sent to exact justice where necessary. Folk tales, Yan told himself, but it was easy to picture Bej as something primordial, mythical, a creature larger than life.

Bej snorted and trotted off into the darkness. Hari laughed softly, as though amused by something, possibly his own reaction to Bej Saihan. The thought did little to comfort Yan. He finished chewing the meat paste and took a swallow from his water bottle. "Hari, why does Che dislike me?"

Hari shook his head. "She doesn't. She's just...cautious."

"Well, it's clear she likes you."

"We get along." A slight pause, then, "Are things going well with you so far?"

Yan kept his voice as neutral as Hari's. "Better than before."

Better now that he and Meh were several thousand kilometers apart. The thought of Meh immediately brought Hari's assistant to mind. In truth Che looked nothing like Meh. She was much taller and skinnier, and her lips thin dark lines, where Meh's mouth curved full against her honey-brown skin. Nevertheless she and Meh both had the same quick frown, the same wary expression. It

was uncanny.

He shrugged away the thought. "So what tests are you running tomorrow, Doctor Dun?"

"Dull stuff," Hari said dryly. "We're running several standard analysis sequences with our equipment to check the calibration. Ah, but then things get interesting. I was thinking, and Kun agrees with me, that we should do a thorough breakdown of the various trees. It would be lovely if we came across another biological treasure like the ones Anwar Enterprises discovered. What about you?"

"Water samples first," Yan said. "Then soil samples, etc. But what really interests me are the tests Au wants to run to check for anti-viral compounds..."

The conversation swung back and forth, much like their path as it skirted the tidal edge. As the sun sank behind the horizon, the breeze shifted, blowing in from the opens seas. Yan felt the day's accumulated sweat evaporate, and he breathed more easily.

The Tau'ini Po'a Islands. Nicknamed A Thousand Pearls. Located 19° 52S, 137° 56W. Includes hundreds of islands ranging from tiny footprints to sizeable land masses stretching thirty or forty kilometers in length. Even the smallest shelter pockets of sea grass, while the largest ones support dense forests of shrubs and low trees.

Unlike the remote Hāna-māna islands, where recent scientific expeditions uncovered the rare tikaki human subspecies, there are no known settlements in the Tau'ini Po'a Islands. Numerous stony reefs ring the island chain, and a peculiar twist in the Kailuang Current makes any approach difficult. Native tribes populate the island chains 150 kilometers to the north, but none have settled upon this world within a world.

Over the next month, Yan settled into a routine. Throughout the morning, he and Lian Luo worked in the laboratory, running tests on their samples. In the afternoon, they wrote up their results and attended meetings with the other team members to discuss the next day's experiments. Evenings he spent in Hari's company or alone, reading. Che remained aloof from him, but he gradually formed tentative friendships with other team members. Once or twice, Lian joined him for lunch. *Six months of paradise*, he thought more than once. *Perhaps Hari was right.*

The first morning of the second month, the rhythm broke.

"Yan, come see," Lian Luo said, poking her head into the laboratory tent. "Something new."

She vanished before Yan could ask anything. He hurried after, but immediately found himself engulfed in a stream of scientists and technicians and support crew. From a distance, he heard Kun Mar bawling out orders for people to keep back, dammit. Yan ducked into the forest and circled around until he came to the front of the crowd.

Kun Mar stood in the clearing next to Bej Saihan. Bej gripped the leg of a small, skinny monkey, which cowered between them.

Not a monkey. A child.

A child that was all bones and brown skin, its legs mottled with scars, its face hidden behind a snarled mass of thick black hair. Young. Maybe eight or nine, though it was hard to tell. He could just make out its eyes and mouth, stretched wide in terror. It was filthy.

"What's going on?" Hari whispered, coming up behind Yan.

"I don't know," Yan whispered back.

The child cried out and launched itself away from Bej. Bej swiftly captured the child's other arm and subdued his captive. Again, the child made a grunting, howling sound.

"It can't talk," Che said softly. She had appeared from nowhere, and now stood next to Hari. Yan glanced down and saw their

fingertips brush each other. Ah. When had that begun?

"Back to work," Mar said brusquely. "Come on, people. Five months isn't forever. We are on a schedule."

The remainder of that day was not a productive one. Distracted, Yan had to run several tests twice over, and from Lian's grumbling, she had the same difficulties. Finally, by mid-day, Yan gave up and sought out Hari.

He found Che and Hari in the otherwise deserted biochemistry labs, talking in low undertones.

"I sent them away," Hari said, obviously weary. "No use working today."

He meant the child, of course.

"Where did Bej find it?" Yan asked.

Che glanced at Hari, who sighed and told Yan what he knew. Bej Saihan and his trackers decided to make a sweep of the island's northern tip, trying to flush out any small reptiles. The trackers had just crossed over the stony ridge that divided the island, when Bej heard a noise.

"He thought it might be a snake," Hari said, "hiding in a patch of brush near the ridge. But then the child burst from its cover. Old Bej thought he'd flushed a monkey until he caught it. Fast little thing."

"It fell," Che said abruptly. "It stumbled over a root, or slipped on the loose rocks. Whatever. It sprained its ankle. Now Kun is trying to decide what to do with it."

"But what about its parents?" Yan said. "Surely –"

"Dead," Hari said softly. "Bej found their bones."

In spite of the heat, Yan's skin prickled with a sudden chill. He had read about such practices among the native island tribes, who sometimes abandoned a criminal on desolate islands. Often, the children of those criminals were exiled along with their parents.

"The gods only know how the child stayed alive," Hari went on. "There's plenty to eat, of course. Shellfish. Roots. Those chewy tubers in the marsh –"

"They cut out its tongue," Che said. "They mutilated a child and left it here to die. And you both talk about the poor thing as though it were a specimen."

She pushed back her chair and stalked from the tent.

Yan made an abortive move to follow. He glanced back at Hari, who signaled for him to stay put. "Let her go. She's upset. More than I would have thought." He blew out a breath. "So am I, come to think of it. So am I."

So were many others in the expedition, though the tension revealed itself in odd ways. Hari and Che quarreled about procedures. Doctor Mar and Doctor Au broke off their late night card games. Lian made excuses when Yan asked about lunch, and several technicians requested changes in sleeping quarters. The fresh-cooked food tasted off, as though spoiled by heat and the cook's inattention.

After a second rebuff from Lian, Yan kept to himself. Once or twice he glimpsed Che in passing. Each time, her gaze flicked away from his, then a cool remote expression settled over her thin face. But she said nothing to him, only hurried on her way.

The third time their paths crossed, twilight was darkening toward night. The twin moons floated above the dark blue ocean, leeching all the color from the emerald green sands. A warm close evening, when the salt tang overpowered the scent of crushed leaves.

Che stopped and changed directions. Yan hurried forward and laid a hand on her shoulder. He felt her shudder through her thin shirt.

"What do you want?" she said.

"To say I'm sorry."

She shifted her gaze to his hand, which had not left her shoulder. "For what?"

Yan licked his lips. "For speaking the way I did about the child Bej found."

No answer. Just that cool remote expression. As though he himself were a vial of chemicals to analyze. Then, "I knew Meh."

That startled him. "You did? Then you know –"

Her lips thinned. "I know how you bullied her. Oh, you did nothing wrong. Nothing outright. But I know your type. You better watch yourself, Doctor Dei. Even if Doctor Hari Dun is your friend."

With a suddenness that took him by surprise, Che knocked away Yan's hand and pushed him aside. Yan fell against a tree trunk. It took him only a moment to recover his footing, but Che was already far beyond him, hurrying, almost running, toward the camp's brightly-lit center.

the little beast was weeping
and snarling. someone would
surely hear. there would be
questions. yan could explain,
but no one would listen.
they never did

Just like Meh, running to a waiting taxi.

"Dammit!"

Yan smacked the tree trunk with his open palm. Damn Meh. Damn Che. What did she mean, *Watch yourself?* As if he had ever stopped watching every word and gesture he made. Damn the damnable stupid heat that pushed and pushed against his patience. Tenure or not, he could not last another five months in this swamp.

He slumped against the tree trunk, breathing hard. His hand throbbed. The palm stung fiercely, scraped raw by the tree trunk. He brushed away the dirt and bits of bark from his hand. It bled slightly, but it would keep until he could talk calmly with the camp physician.

Walk it out, he told himself. That always works.

He circled the camp and headed toward the beach, only to hear the sounds of laughter and cheers. Evidently, a group of the younger technicians had made a bonfire. A few were singing off-key, and Yan caught a whiff of roasted meat and wood-smoke.

With a muttered curse, he veered onto another path that led along the eastern edge of camp. Here the tents and wooden shelters were deserted, lit only by a few cool-lamp bulbs. He flicked on his pocket lantern. The soft trill of insects made a blanket of soothing noise, punctuated by the high-pitched chirp of the small frogs in the marshes.

And a soft persistent whimpering.

He paused and located the source of that whimpering – it came from one of the supply tents.

The child.

He had not seen it since that first day. After protracted arguments between Kun Mar and Bej Saihan, Mar had at last agreed to arrange for its care. "We've no damned anthropologists," he'd muttered, according to Hari. "And no damned nannies."

But that was enough for Saihan, who had cleared one of the supply tents for the child's sleeping quarters. Away from the main laboratory tents, close enough for casual supervision.

Yan hesitated. He retraced his steps and ducked inside the supply tent, letting the flap close behind him. A sudden scrambling broke out to his left, then he heard a garbled cry. Yan lifted his lamp and shone the light over the interior.

The tent was a mess. Dirty bowls were scattered about. Three or four gray-green blankets made a nest in one corner. The whole thing smelled of sweat and filth. Then his light caught the child, who had squeezed behind a few cardboard boxes in one corner.

A girl, he thought. A little girl. He had not noticed before.

She was naked, but clean. Much cleaner than that first day, when Bej brought her into camp. Scars and bites covered her legs, her feet and hands were rough with calluses, but her eyes were like brilliant black stars. Thick glossy hair spilled over her face.

Yan crouched down. "Hello. Bej left you all alone?"

No answer. No sign she had even heard him.

"What's the matter? Are you deaf, too?"

Odd that they left no one to supervise the child. But then, Mar didn't want distractions, and Bej had his own duties. She was a pretty thing, Yan thought, now that they had washed her. He reached out to brush the hair away from her cheek. To his dismay, the girl flinched away from his touch.

"Hey, I'm not trying to hurt you –"

The girl launched herself away from him, but collapsed with a hoarse cry, clutching at the thick cast around her ankle. No wonder she had not run off. Yan took hold of her arm to help her up. With a quick twist of her head, the girl bit Yan's hand. Yan gave a muffled shout and smacked her hard across the face. Again that grating cry.

"Stop it," he hissed. "Stop making so much noise."

The little beast was weeping and snarling. Someone would surely hear. There would be questions. Yan could explain, but no one would listen. They never did. He grabbed for the girl's arm and managed to capture one wrist, then the other. Now he had her on her back, his hand over her mouth. All the while he was muttering, "Quiet. Quiet. Quiet."

Without warning, the girl went limp. Yan stared down at her, his chest rising in time with hers falling. His heart beating against hers. Her eyes wide and dark with terror.

Yan pushed away from the girl. "No," he whispered. "No."

He stumbled back to his tent, still shaking, and crawled into his cot. No one had seen. No one. Please dear gods. He had done nothing. Nothing wrong. He needed this job. Needed this second chance...

That night, he dreamed of midnight skies above still black seas.

The next morning, he woke groggy and underslept. Dreams didn't matter, he told himself. He drank down a pot of strong tea and set to work examining a series of microbe cultures that Lian had prepared for him. When Hari dropped by for lunch, Yan waved him away. "I think I'm onto something."

"I hope so," Hari said cryptically.

Yan barely heard him leave. He worked through the noon hour, quitting only when the heat became unbearable. He switched off the equipment and stared through the tent's fabric at the glaring sunlight outside. *I lied, he thought. I'm not onto something. No one here is.*

Progress reports from the other two research sites had arrived that morning. In spite of his absorption in his own work, Yan had heard mutterings from the other members on his team. *Valuable data*, said all the reports. *But so far, no practical applications.*

Yan rubbed the sweat from his face. Lian. Che. Hari. Mar. They had all foolishly hoped for the same success as Anwar Enterprises's first expedition that had discovered the miraculous *tikaki* people and their regenerative blood. It was hope that made their disappointments even harder to bear.

He retreated to his tent and stayed there for the whole afternoon, his shirt off, with an electric fan blowing directly on his face, as he reviewed the printout of his latest tests. Odd and peculiar microbes inhabited XTI-19S137W-1A's soil and water. He might – could – make the case that microbes here represented a separate evolutionary chain, itself a valuable discovery for the scientific world, but so far, it was all speculation. He had uncovered nothing that could turn a profit for XianGen Pharmaceuticals or its government friends. And that meant no second chance for Yan Dei.

The rest of the day vanished into a haze of frustration. That night he dreamed that enormous creatures hunted him through XTI-19S137W-1A's scrubby forests. One in particular, a massive beast with blunt, yellow fangs, chased him along the island's stony spine. Yan kept glancing back – he could not help himself – only to see the beast gaining on him. His foot came down on a loose rock. He slipped with a garbled cry...

...and woke covered in stinking sweat.

Yan wiped his hands over his eyes. Impossible to catch his breath in this thick air. Impossible to sleep. He got up from his cot and pulled on a pair of loose trousers. A swig of water cleared the sour taste from his mouth. He splashed more water over his face and rubbed himself all over with a wet cloth. Hot. The air as thick as mud. His heart beat erratically, as though he had run for his life.

A walk. He needed a walk.

Yan picked up his pocket lamp, shoved his feet into his shoes, and headed out of the tent. Just a walk, he told himself. He'd go upstream and sit on the rocks. Listen to the water rill past until he got sleepy again.

His path took him past the supply compound. All was dark and silent around the tent where they housed the girl. Unconsciously, he rubbed his hand between the thumb and palm, where the girl had bitten him. Stupid girl. Hardly any difference between her and Meh, come to think of it. Both squalled if you looked at them the wrong way.

Yan paused, breathing heavily.

Don't do it. Don't think about it. Don't –

He lifted the flap and ducked inside. The girl did not stir. Only when his hand covered her mouth did she start awake. There was a brief struggle, but Yan was stronger and bigger. "Quiet, quiet, quiet," he murmured, though he knew she could not understand. "Be good. Be quiet."

She went limp, and did not move as Yan unbuckled his trousers. No response as he insinuated his tongue into that emptiness that was her mouth. Only when he pushed her legs apart and forced himself inside did she fight back. The stump of flesh, all that was left of her tongue, worked against his, as though she were trying to speak.

That night Yan dreamed of the scent of crushed leaves. The rich ripe sweat on his body. His mouth on hers. Her eyes, her wide dark eyes, just a few inches from his.

.....
"They've named her Ah-ne," Hari mentioned a few days later.

He and Yan sat together on the beach, eating their mid-day meal. Yan could see the remains of the bonfire – burnt logs, discarded cups, and the blackened empty shell from an enormous sea turtle. A few clouds smudged the southern horizon, suggesting that they might have rain showers later.

"Why Ah-ne?" Yan asked.

"From the sounds she makes. It's strange. She was a wild little creature when they caught her – and I can't blame the poor child – but now she's as quiet and calm as anyone would like. Just makes that grunting sound when someone comes into the tent. Ah-ne. Like that."

Yan nodded, only half listening. He raked his hair back from his face. His skin felt sticky, even though he had just bathed, and there was a heavy cloying scent on his skin that reminded him of Ah-ne.

He had avoided the supply tent and the girl these past few days, and immersed himself in work. It was work he needed. Work to block unhappy thoughts about Meh or Lian or Che. Work to numb the temptation. To his relief, the dreams had gradually faded. That same morning, Doctor Au had spoken with Yan privately. He was impressed with Yan's meticulous attention to detail. He was especially pleased with Yan's dedication in the face of growing rumors about the expedition.

"We have all contributed valuable knowledge," he said. "Especially you, Doctor Dei. If you care to join the research division at Xiang-Gen, I would be happy to recommend your name."

With a start, he realized that Hari had stopped talking. "Sorry," he said. "I was thinking about next week's experiments. Another month and I might have something to make Doctor Mar happy."

Hari shot him a strange look. "Didn't you hear? Kun is talking about moving our site to another island. Next week we might all be packing our equipment."

Yan suppressed a start. "Next week? What about –"

"Your experiments? If Au agrees, take samples with you. Or start

fresh with the new island. I heard Kun mention XTI-19S142W-8C. If that's the one, he's gambling on its isolation."

Hari rambled on about the characteristics of their possible destination, which was unique among the Tau'ini Po'a islands. Isolated from the others, with higher, older forests according to the survey teams. Most likely, Kun would order the other ships to new islands as well.

It was for the best, Yan thought, as Hari continued to talk. Mar would release the girl back into the wild. She would return to the life she knew. He thought again of her eyes, her wide dark eyes that took in everything Yan did, and his pulse gave an uncomfortable jump. How much would she remember? Would she even recognize him again?

Within another day, Doctor Mar announced the long-expected departure to another island. Two weeks, he told the senior scientists, who reported the news to their teams. Two weeks to wrap up their experiments and pack their equipment.

Yan remembered little of those two weeks. He spent long hours cataloging their existing microbe cultures, making duplicates of his reports and Lian's, discussing possible changes in procedure with Doctor Au. By evening, his bones had turned to water, and he dropped into his cot, exhausted. If he dreamed, he did not remember.

"Good news," Hari said to Yan during one of their rare visits together. "Kun has undergone a heart transplant and shows signs of actual humanity. Let us hope it doesn't ruin his abilities to manage the expedition."

"What are you talking about?" Yan said. In spite of the long hours, and hard work, his mood was hopeful. Lian's earlier remoteness had faded, and she had agreed to have dinner with him.

"I'm talking about Ah-ne," Hari said. "Kun is sending her back to the mainland on the next supply ship. He thinks they might do something to restore her voice. Probably there's a grant involved, but it's not like him."

Cold washed over Yan's skin, in spite of the heat. "No, it's not. I thought –" He broke off and managed a weak smile. "I rather thought he'd leave her behind."

"Hmmm. He's a practical man, not a brute. But yes, I'm surprised, too, at how much he's willing to do for the poor thing. Perhaps Doctor Mar thinks to impress the anthropologists after all. Think what the girl could tell use about her early life."

"Yes. Just think," Yan said softly. Dimly he listened to Hari's talk about major breakthroughs with voice box technology, pioneered by that same Anwar Enterprises whose success had inspired this expedition.

Ah-ne. Ah-ne talking. Not just with her eyes, but with her mouth, that soft empty mouth that now could grunt and sigh, but never shape the words for her thoughts.

Yan stood up abruptly. "Sorry, Hari. Got to lie down. Headache."

He stumbled away, not waiting for Hari's reply.

In his tent, he fumbled through his supply of medicines. He was not lying, he thought as he opened the bottle of aspirin with shaking hands. His head ached. His eyes throbbed in time with his pulse. Another moment and his stomach would heave up his lunch.

He swallowed the aspirin and then a double-dose of sleeping tablets, ones he had not used since Meh first left him. Two pills, not any more. He was upset, not ready to die. The sleeping pills almost stuck in his throat. He gagged and forced them down, then drank water until his stomach hurt. He lay down and closed his eyes, waiting for oblivion.

...moonlight flickering between the branches of swaying palm trees. A pack of dogs chased after him, their tongues licking the air, as

though tasting his scent. All of them were huge – Ame-no's hunting dogs, the pemburu. He recognized them from old paintings, from carvings on temple walls, from his nightmares of two weeks past...

He woke to full night. A hum from the insects drifted through the air. Yan stood, shaky from hunger. More water helped to revive him, but his stomach still felt pinched, and his skin itched. Images from his nightmare flickered through his brain, and merged with yesterday's memories.

Ah-ne. Ah-ne talking. Ah-ne speaking her memories.

He was halfway to the supply tent without even knowing what he intended to do. Talk to her. Try to persuade her. She had to understand how he had not meant to hurt her. Not that way. He found himself muttering, *hush, hush, hush*, as he crawled inside and fastened the flap shut so that no one could see. Ah-ne lay curled into a tight ball, hands laid together beneath her cheek.

Yan touched the girl's shoulder. "Ah-ne."

She woke with a start and scrambled away from him, making panicked grunting sounds. Yan caught her by the arm. "No, Ah-ne. That's not why I came here. I came..."

How to explain?

"I came," he started over, "to ask you something."

Ah-ne struggled against his grip. She was breathing hard, making that soft grunting sound. *Ah. Eh. Ah. Eh.* No sign that she understood. How could she? Had she ever learned to speak before her people cut out her tongue? Maybe –

No, he could not depend on that.

"I can't talk here," he muttered. "Come with me."

He bundled her from the tent and hauled her to her feet. Her ankle had healed enough that she could stand, though she limped slightly as Yan dragged her away from the campsite. She tried to bite his hands. He gave her a hard shake and a slap. "Be quiet."

She went limp a moment. Thereafter, she stumbled after him, silent except for her labored breathing.

A short distance from the camp's edge, Yan plunged into the forest and aimed for the marshes. No one kept any watch, but couples sometimes prowled about, looking for privacy. He wanted no unexpected encounters with other members of the expedition.

For a while, the going was difficult. Once he passed the crisscrossing paths made by the expedition, he had to fight his way through the thorn bushes. The air was unusually close, here among the trees, filled with a musky scent from the leaves. Moonlight flickered through the branches, reminding him uncomfortably of his dreams, but he pressed on.

Gradually the trees thinned to an open patch of rough grass by the edge of the marshes. Yan stopped and knelt before Ah-ne. The girl's face was wet with tears, he realized with a start.

"Ah-ne," he said softly.

She stared at him, lips pushed out. Watching. He could feel her watching. Feel the tension in her skinny arms.

He tried again. "Ah-ne. They will take you away. Make you talk. They might...they might ask you questions."

He closed his eyes. Who was he fooling? He could not make her understand. Could not until she learned their language and for that she needed her tongue. And if she had her tongue –

Without warning, Ah-ne wrenched away. Taken by surprise, Yan almost lost his grip on her. He yanked her back around. She spat in his face.

A wave of red swept over his vision. He pushed Ah-ne to the ground and fell atop her. Ah-ne tried to twist away, but Yan captured her fists and crushed his mouth against hers to silence her grunts. Still thrashing, the girl whipped her head around and caught Yan

hard on his temple. Stunned, he collapsed to one side. The next moment, Ah-ne had wriggled free and was on her feet, running.

"Ah-ne." Yan lurched upright and immediately stumbled over a root. Damn, damn, damn. She would run to camp. Kun Mar would find out. He'd dismiss Yan from the expedition. Au would withdraw his offer and notify the University.

Then, above the pounding of his heart, Yan heard a splashing sound, then a soft thudding as Ah-ne gained firm ground. She was heading for the ridge, where Bej Saihan had discovered her.

He ran a few steps. Stopped.

A girl. A savage beast-girl like that. She could disappear into the wild. She had lived there her entire life after all. And this time, she might know to avoid the trackers. Even trackers like Bej Saihan, whatever his background.

With a last glance toward the ridge, Yan started back to his tent.

.....
"No sign of her?" Yan said.

A weary Bej Saihan stumped back into the campsite. "None." He took off his hat and wiped his face, looking entirely human, and not at all like a creature of the gods. "We checked the valley. We checked all the ravines in the area. We even dredged the marshes, just in case. Nothing."

More search teams returned throughout the morning, but already the expedition members had turned their attention from Ah-ne's disappearance to the final preparations for departure. Stacks of crates awaited transport to the ship. A crew dismantled the remaining tents. The settlement had vanished, leaving a bare clearing and scattered trash heaps. Yan had packed up the last of his own belongings, and now oversaw the transfer of the lab equipment onto the ship.

Only when he was about to board the ship did Hari return with Che at his side.

You could tell he was more disappointed than Bej himself, Yan thought, taking in the man's stained shirt, his mud-caked boots, and the dark bruises beneath his eyes. "I'm sorry," Yan said softly.

Hari shook his head. "We tried. She wanted to go."

Che took Hari's hand. "Come," she said softly. "We all have work to do."

Hari smiled at her wearily. "That we do."

Yan watched as the two walked through the empty site toward the ship. Briefly he wondered when things had changed between them. Then he turned to his own chores. Che was right. They all had work to do. And Lian would need help with storing and labeling the last of their samples.

Within the hour, the last crates were aboard, the last transport skiffs hauled up. The ship's motors chugged to life, the solar sails expanded to catch the sun, and the ship slowly backed away from the shallow bay. Yan leaned against the rail, watching the island shrink slowly to a small point on the horizon.

In five or six days, they would arrive at the new island. More work lay ahead – it would almost be like starting over – but Yan didn't mind. A new island meant a new chance. Who knows, perhaps it was best that Meh had left him. He should forget about her entirely and concentrate on someone new. Someone like Lian, who seemed to appreciate him better.

The winds shifted and blew hard against his face. He drew a deep lungful of the cool salt-laden air. Already he could breathe more easily. ✧

Beth's fiction has appeared in *Asimov's*, *Strange Horizons*, *Helix SF* and *Sex in the System*, among other places, and her novella 'Ars Memoriae' will appear as a limited-edition chapbook from PS Publishing in 2009. She is currently at work on too many novels.

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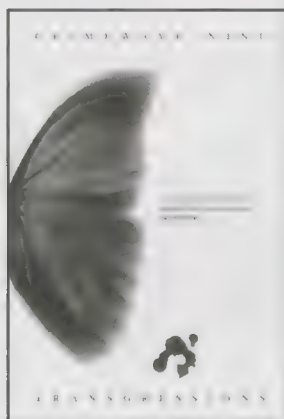
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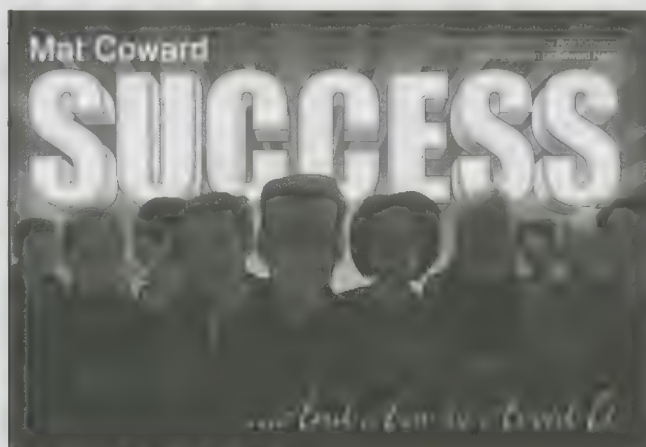
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SCIENCE

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Will McIntosh

 cop was doubled over, clutching a parking meter, puking on the sidewalk as a half dozen onlookers wearing white virus masks gawked from a safe distance. Ange stopped on the bottom step of her porch, thirty feet away.

The puking went from a trickle to a sudden bursting hydrant gush, then back to a trickle. It was spattered in a six foot swath, steam rising as the hot sidewalk boiled it. The cop made awful guttural sounds when the puking slowed enough, as though his intestines were about to spill onto the sidewalk as well.

"What is it?" a fat, grey-haired woman asked.

The bald guy standing next to her shook his head. "I don't know. It's a bad one." They took a half-step back; the other onlookers followed suit.

Ange watched as the puke turned pink, then red. Gasps and *oh my gods* from the crowd. The cop's eyes bulged as the puke lost its thickish chunky quality and became smooth, bright red blood. He dropped to his knees, weaved as blood stained the front of his blue uniform a deep purple, then collapsed to the pavement.

"Jesus," someone behind Ange muttered as a few final spasms squeezed the cop dry. He lay still, his eyes vacant. In the distance, a siren warbled, growing closer.

Ange turned away. Chair was watching from the porch. A skinny, bald, bow-legged guy in his fifties stood next to him. The guy had a backpack slung over his shoulder, and he was crying. Ange joined them.

The guy gawked at Ange, starting at her toes and slowly climbing to her dark green eyes. "Wow, would I like to make love to you," he said, wiping tears from his cheek.

Ange fixed him with her best bitch stare. "Yeah, thanks, let me get back to you on that." The way he said it was so fucking odd she didn't know how to take it. Not a hint of flirtation, more like he was just stating a fact.

"A new one," Chair said, motioning toward the cop with his chin. "Got to be engineered. Too quick to be a natural virus." Ange nodded. Chair sighed, rotated his wheelchair in a tight circle, waited for Ange to open the screen door for him. Chair was wearing shorts, the elaborate black steelwork of his long-nonfunctioning bionic legs exposed. Even Chair was putting vanity aside in the scorching heat. The skinny guy followed Chair in. He walked loose, his arms swinging, like he owned the freaking world, and he now sported a shitass grin apropos of who the fuck knew what.

"Who's he?" Ange asked Chair as they stepped inside.

"Ange, this is Sebastian. Delivery man from the Science Alliance in Atlanta," Chair said, raising his eyebrows significantly behind delicate eyeglasses that looked absurd on his mastiff head.

Ange's heart rate doubled. "Shit, you're kidding. I had no idea. You don't look like an eco-terrorist."

"I don't feel like an eco-terrorist," Sebastian said, shrugging.

Ange followed them into the living room. She dropped onto a couch coated with dog hair and swung her legs onto the coffee table, forgetting that one of the legs was broken. It collapsed into a three-point stance. "Shit," she whispered. Uzi trotted into the room, hopped on the couch next to her, circled a couple of times and dropped like a stone, pushing his ass right up against her.

"You know, the government's not fucking around," Ange said. "If you pull something and get caught, we won't go to jail; the cops'll just drag us into the street and shoot us."

"No doubt," Chair said. "If you don't agree with what we're doing, move out."

"It's not that I don't agree -"

"It's just that the stakes are too high. Yeah, I get it. What's worth risking your life over, Ange? A couple of billion people are going to die if things stay business as usual. If we can do our part to cut that in half, is it worth the risk?"

"We don't know for sure that billions of people are going to die."

"Yeah, we do. For sure."

ILLUSTRATED by CHRIS NURSE

"We do," Sebastian chimed, nodding.

"It's all based on stochastic models," she said. "It's incredibly speculative."

Chair glared at her. "How many times do scientists have to be right before people give them a little credit? And you of all people, about to get your doctorate, should have some faith in them." He snared the remote from the arm of the couch, stabbed the power button. CNN came on. The president was having a news conference.

Almost on cue, the TV jingled and a text message scrolled across the bottom of the screen: ANGE. I WANT TO SEE YOU. I'M FREE MONDAY, TUESDAY, OR THURSDAY FOR DINNER. CAN WE MEET ONE OF THOSE NIGHTS? ALBERT.

Even the way he phrased things made her want to puke. *I want to see you*. Like she was his fucking servant, not his doctoral student. The thought of sitting through another dinner with him, of having to put up with his constant jockeying to *touch* her in seemingly innocent ways –

Chair ignored the message. "They keep warning us, and we just keep carrying on as usual, and things keep getting worse. 'We have to keep the economy going,' the president says, while the fucking ocean is lapping at our ankles –"

"Okay, fine. I know the score, I don't need a lecture."

The screen door squealed and slammed. "Damn, what happened out there?" Rami breezed into the room, carrying a stack of newspapers. He emptied a different paper dispenser every day – his way of protesting their editorial policies.

As Chair introduced Sebastian to Rami, Ange got up and hovered near the doorway. She wasn't sure she wanted to be part of this meeting.

"At least they're doing something," Rami said when Ange voiced her objections. "When I think of the scientists, I think of people sitting on the sidelines, doing a lot of talking."

"We're sick of sitting on the sidelines. We're taking matters into our own hands," Sebastian said. He didn't look like a scientist, either.

"You know I'm in," Rami said. "So what's in the bag?"

"I have two deliveries for you," Sebastian unzipped his backpack. Uzi trotted over, stuck his nose into the pack and snuffled, probably hoping it was filled with bacon.

"Uzi, get your butt over here," Ange said. Uzi just wagged his tail.

Sebastian pulled something from the pack with a flourish, held it between thumb and forefinger. He was giggling. There was something definitely wrong with this guy. "Bamboo root," he said. It was a cone-shaped tannish nub, crowned with four or five tiny lemon fingers, reaching skyward. "It's engineered to spread like crazy. It can push through concrete, blacktop, anything. It's fast – you won't believe how fast."

"Nature taking back its territory by force. I like it," Rami said. "The authorities will suspect the Jumpy-Jumps. It's got their whimsical sensibility."

"But without the sick surprise at the bottom of the box," Chair said.

"We want to coat the entire southeast with it, in one coordinated attack, to bring commerce to a grinding halt. We'll plant it at night, in places where it will cause maximum disruption – busy roads, shopping plazas, tourist attractions. We need to slow things down, clog the roads so vehicles can't operate, keep the military busy, slow the violence in the streets. This stuff will have them pulling their hair out."

Ange went over and sat on the arm of the couch. "Could that stall food transport? People might starve."

"It could make transport difficult, but people shouldn't literally

starve. Some may."

"That's pretty fucking cold," Ange said.

"Depends on how you look at it. Are a few thousand lives lost now worth saving a few million later?"

"What's the other delivery?" Chair asked.

Sebastian smiled wide, spread his arms. "You're looking at him!"

Chair frowned. "You're the other delivery?"

Sebastian nodded.

"So what can you do?" Rami asked.

"It's not what I can do, it's what I carry. In my blood." He fished around in his backpack, pulled out a plastic bag attached to a thin tube. He pressed the end of the tube against the crook of one elbow, demonstrating that it was for drawing blood. "It's called Doctor Happy, and it's guaranteed to take the fight out of anyone infected with it."

It was scorching hot by afternoon, and they couldn't afford the juice to cool the place, so they moved to the canopied roof with a boom-box, cranked up some Necrobang, and planned their first Doctor Happy infection party.

While Sebastian bled himself, Ange helped embed short pins in the leather fingerpads of some VR gloves that Rami sometimes wore



as a tech-dude fashion statement. Including Chair and Rami, Ange counted eleven members of the infection gang. She knew most of them.

She was still uneasy about this; the whole thing smelled so much like a Jumpy-Jump operation. The plan was to spread the virus pretty much at random, trying to target males, and anyone who looked pro-business or pro-government, when possible. Sticking those who would benefit most from the virus – gang types, political leaders, police – was deemed too risky. She made it clear that she would work as a spotter, making sure no cops caught on to what they were doing, but wouldn't help infect. She felt guilty about not being a team player, and when Chair met her eyes, she thought she saw masked disappointment.

As they worked and planned, Sebastian kept them focused on the big picture: they were engineering a softer landing for the impending collapse. He kept reassuring them that the secret cabal of Nobel Prize winner-types who were calling the shots knew what they were doing.

Rami broke out a quart of home-brewed grain alcohol and passed it around. When the boom box reached a particularly breezy song, Ange and a few others broke loose.

Chair nodded to the beat, watching people who had movable limbs with only a hint of envy. "Carpe diem," he shouted over the music, "but never forget that we're partying on the fucking Titanic." He took a long swig from a soiled plastic cup.

Were things really going to get worse? Ange didn't want to believe it, but it was hard to ignore police puking blood on the sidewalk in front of your house. On TV and in the papers, the assumption was that things would get better soon, that the stock market would recover, the Jumpy Jump movement would be crushed, the war with China would end, that we'd get a grip on melting icecaps without dramatic changes to our 'way of life'. But there'd already been super-sized changes to Ange's way of life. She missed air conditioning, daily showers, eating anything she wanted at any time.

Pouring sweat, semi-buzzed, they hit the sidewalk market on Barnard Street, where the crowds were packed tight, and hopefully too focused on the deadly-serious business of buying food and clothes and video games to notice pinpricks.

Rami led the way, winding through the crowds so naturally. He stopped to examine a table of sorry-looking pistols locked in a glass display case, then turned and bumped into a guy in an expensive suit, grabbing the guy's shoulders as if to steady himself. His timing was perfect; the guy didn't even flinch from the stick.

Others weren't so smooth. Junie tapped a potato vendor on the shoulder, as if seeking his attention to ask a question. The vendor jerked, spun around to face her when the needle stuck him. When he saw Junie had nothing in her hand, he relaxed. She asked her potato question, and he answered impatiently and turned back around.

The real trick was reloading the pin with blood. They had to get it only on the pin head, not on their gloves. Leaving bloody smudges on people was not advisable; people would rather have a rat on them than someone else's bodily fluids. They all seemed to be doing well, though, getting at the uncapped vials of Sebastian's blood hidden in their pockets.

Once Rami got comfortable, he played his bumping trick on a few

An ultralight helicopter buzzed overhead, casting a drifting shadow on the street

cops and soldiers, despite what they'd agreed. It went off without a hitch. The guy was fearless.

The victims would suffer mild flulike symptoms for a day or two, then they would feel extremely peaceful and happy for the rest of their lives. Hooray for them.

Albert stood as she approached the table, opened his arms for the obligatory grope-hug, sporting a grin he probably thought was dashing or sophisticated. She steeled herself as he wrapped his arms around her and rubbed both hands up and down the back of her arms.

"Well," he said as they took a seat at the small, candle-lit table. "Are we going to bullshit, or are we going to get intimate?"

"I thought we could talk about scheduling my defense," Ange said, ignoring the question. "Did you read the revised draft of the discussion section?"

Albert shook his head. "I haven't had time. I've got my own work to think about. As soon as it's finished, I'll send you a copy. I'd like to get your comments."

That was supposed to make her feel important, that he would deign to seek her opinion of his own lofty work. How had she ever admired this man? How had she not immediately seen through his paper-thin posturing? He was like a silent movie actor, exaggerating the role of professor to the point of caricature. Just looking at him made her skin crawl. His thick lips and nostrils, the professorly grey beard grown to hide his weak little chin.

He took forever to order, quizzing the waitress on what type of tuna they served, listing off the genus and species of the possibilities as if this might jog the waitress's memory. When he finally finished putting on his 'see how smart I am' show and the waitress had escaped, he reached across the table, brushed a wisp of hair out of Ange's eyes. She wanted so badly to pin that soft little hand to the table with a fork. But she wanted that PhD, and the patent rights for her vertical-weave grass. She wanted it so, so bad.

"I shouldn't have done that, should I?" Albert said, a naughty boy smile on his face.

"When do you think I can defend?"

He took a deep breath, rubbed his beard thoughtfully with stubby thumb and stubby forefinger. "I really think you need to run a third trial."

"What?" No. No fucking way. He didn't just say that.

"Not as elaborate as the first two. If we're going to get a major corporation interested in marketing the grass, the research has to be impeccable."

Ange felt like she was going to cry. "But I was hoping to be on the job market in September. I can't run another study and defend before then."

"Well, why don't we discuss it further, after we've both had time to process?" He pulled his shiny brown leather satchel (which screamed *I am a college professor*) into his lap, pulled out his appointment calendar, and laid it on the table. "My wife will be out of town the first half of next week. Why don't you come over to my place Tuesday night for dinner? I've been studying Swedish cuisine, I think you'll be impressed."

"Your place?" Ange said.

"Around eight?" Albert said. He stared at her, pen poised to record the appointment.

A realization hit her then, as she stared at Albert's raised eyebrows, with a certainty bordering on prescience. He wasn't going to let her defend her dissertation, or allow her to patent and market the grass, which he and the university owned a stake in, until he fucked her. That was his price. Until then, he was going to delay her, and make her sit through a thousand excruciating dinners.

Uzi tugged on his leash, panting and wagging his tail, trying to pull her across the street toward Jackson Square and its Live Oaks. He lived to pee on those massive trunks.

"Uzi, no," Ange said, as if that would phase her semi-retarded dog. She pulled him along the sidewalk, toward Oglethorpe, and the psych department.

There were more people in the park than usual. More adults, anyway. The kids were always there, playing their incomprehensible games, jumping among big colored dots that they laid along the squares and sidewalks in different patterns each time, alternately frowning in concentration and laughing like hell, dousing each other with industrial-strength waterguns, rolling dice the size of baseballs. But now there were also groups of adults, sitting in circles, cooking in pots on open fires. Ange suspected many were infected with Doctor Happy.

Doctor Happy had made the local evening news three days after their party – a strange new virus with symptoms the newscaster described as 'disorientation, amotivation, and giddiness'. Sebastian said the government wasn't going to like this virus at all. Authoritarian types are uncomfortable with people altering their consciousness – they'd rather see them vomit blood.

An ultralight helicopter buzzed overhead, casting a drifting shadow on the street. Some rich fuck probably going for a martini at Rooftop Elysium. What she wouldn't give for a rocket launcher. When she got her PhD, she'd never become one of them. She'd live in a better place, sure, but not gated. But first she had to get the PhD. It meant even more to her than the grass patent. The patent would mean money if they could get a corporation interested, but it wasn't money she wanted.

For four years she'd dreamed of walking across that stage, her whole family – mom, Cory, grandpa, grandma, and her bitch aunt

– all watching as the university president handed her the PhD.

What do you think of your crank-addict loser drug-rehab dropout granddaughter now? She wouldn't have to say it out loud. It would loom in the air as her friends circled her, calling her doctor. Probably none of them but her mom and Cory would actually show up when she did graduate, but the fantasy worked better when they were all sitting in a row on those metal folding chairs, watching.

It was a shallow reason to want a PhD, and it wasn't her only reason, but goddammit, she craved that moment.

A Jumpy-Jump lounged on a stoop up ahead, watching Ange approach. He was dressed in a mock-mailman outfit, the U.S. MAIL shoulder patches executed in ornate calligraphy.

"That's a big dog for such a little peanut," he said as she drew near. Ange smiled tightly, kept her pace steady. She'd seen the guy around – he was ethnic, maybe East Indian. Long braided hair. He spoke with the singsong accent that Jumpy-Jump's had evidently invented out of thin air.

"Where are you and your big dog so urgently needed?" He stood lazily, not exactly blocking the sidewalk, but impeding it. Ange veered into the street, cutting a wide path around him, trying not to walk scared. She hated that she couldn't walk down the street without having some asshole harass her. Hated it.

"I'm talking to you, don't disappear me," he said. He moved to block her path.

Uzi snarled and lunged. Ange held his leash tight; the Jumpy-Jump leaped clear of Uzi's snapping teeth.

A heartbeat later, there were blades all over him, jutting from his belt, his boots; he clutched what looked like machetes in both fists. "You think your big dog can protect you?" There was blood and a ragged gash on his thumb – Uzi had just caught his retreating hand.

Ange dragged Uzi backward. He was barking and snapping, scrabbling to get at the man. When she had him under control, she ran.

"I can fuck you any time I want, little peanut," the Jumpy-Jump shouted after her. "Right here on the daylight street. Strip off your false security and live in constant fear, where you belong."

She ran until she reached the psych building, then sat on the marble steps and composed herself.

She was so fucking tired of it, tired of people wielding power, causing her grief just because they could. What the fuck had happened to the police? When she was a kid the police stopped shit like this from happening. Now they just looked out for their own interests.

She tethered Uzi to the bike rack and headed to the department chair's office.

Dr Stokes, the department chair, listened to her story, nodding sympathetically. By the time Ange had finished, her eyes were blazing with anger.

"That son of a bitch," Stokes said. She shook her head thoughtfully. "I wish there was something I could do. All I can think of is for you to switch advisors. Of course Albert's the only neuropsych person left. You'd have to start your dissertation over."

"You're shitting me, right?" Ange said.

"I wish I was. I can't force him to let you defend; department chair is just an administrative position, I don't have power over other faculty.

"Can't he be fired for this?" Ange asked.

Stokes shook her head. "He's tenured. You would have to go through Judicial Affairs to fire him, and there is no Judicial Affairs office any more. Budget cuts."

"What about the Dean, or the President?"

"You've got to be realistic. When buildings are being bombed and politically outspoken faculty disappear in the middle of the night,

incivilities just don't mean much. There aren't enough resources to deal with the small injustices any more. When was the last time you saw someone getting a speeding ticket?"

"This is not a speeding ticket!"

"I know, I know. I'm sorry." Stokes stood, walked toward her door in a not-so-subtle hint that the meeting was over. "Switch specialties if he won't let you finish. Do another dissertation. It's the only advice I can give you. Or –" She shook her head, reconsidering.

"Or what? Or let him fuck me?"

"That's not what I was going to say. But it's an option." Ange opened her mouth to curse a storm, but Stokes cut her off. "These are dark times, Ange. The streets are anarchy. A doctorate gets you off the streets and into a gated community with private security. The stakes are high. Close your eyes and think of someone else."

Ange glared razors at her, then stormed off.

She took the long way home, wandering through the shady little squares that dotted downtown Savannah, letting Uzi pee to his heart's content. At least one of them would get what he wanted today. And he deserved a reward for taking a bite out of that Jumpy-Jump.

The sun was low in the sky, filtering through the twisted, moss-covered branches of the oaks, adding a gold tinge to the red brick path.



She was so close. So fucking close. A two-hour defense, three signatures, and she was a PhD. She could teach at a university, or continue her research for an agro corporation.

Should she just sleep with him? Would it be a one-time thing, or would she have to put out for weeks, until the actual defense. She was so angry she wanted to scream. The whole world sucked ass.

As they approached Jackson Square, Ange stopped short. Sebastian was sitting on a bench in the square, with the Jumpy-Jump who had threatened her an hour earlier. They were laughing like old pals. Sebastian spotted her and waved; the Jumpy Jump turned, smiled.

"Little peanut! Come join us."

Uzi growled. Ange wrapped his lead around her palm two or three times, then headed toward the bench.

"You two know each other?" Sebastian said as she approached.

"Yes indeed," the Jumpy-Jump said. He held out a bandaged hand without getting up, looking amused, as if they had shared a joke rather than an altercation. Ange ignored his hand. Uzi let out a rolling growl that went on and on. "We began our song with the wrong note, I fear." He dropped his hand, stretched out on the bench and sighed contentedly. "So, little peanut, what do *you* think of our Dada Jihad?"

Ange had read about the Jumpy-Jump movement in the paper. They were mostly poor, no jobs, no access to medical care or welfare since the depression hit, but the actual doctrine was incoherent bullshit. "I understand why you're angry, but I don't understand why you kill random people. What do you expect to get out of it?"

"Me?"

"Jumpy-Jumps, I mean."

"We don't expect anything." He shrugged, his eyes twinkling.

"It doesn't make sense."

"Does anything make sense? It's all absurd. We're just unleashing some vicious absurdity to underscore the point." He stood, made a peace sign. "Sebastian, it was a pleasure."

Sebastian returned the gesture. "Same here, Rumor."

"Down is up, and sinners are saints, little peanut," Rumor said as he turned to leave.

"My name is Ange."

"Down is up, and sinners are saints, little Ange."

Uzi barked once as Rumor stood at the edge of the square, waiting for a truck to pass, before sauntering between two abandoned gas hogs and across the street.

"Why were you talking to that asshole?" Ange asked.

"I'll talk to pretty much anyone." He reached out and scratched Uzi under the chin. Uzi wagged his tail, licked his slobbering chops. Uzi would talk to pretty much anyone who would rub on him.

"So tell me about your research," Sebastian said. "Chair tells me your degree is in botanical biotech."

"I'm not going to work for your friends in Atlanta," Ange said, glaring at him. "I'd never be able to get a legitimate job once I started down that path." It didn't surprise her that Chair had tipped Sebastian off about what Ange was studying. Recruiting for the cause.

Sebastian smiled. "I understand. I'm just curious about what you're working on."

"I've developed a vertical weave grass. It never has to be mowed, and once it gets established, weeds can't penetrate the weave, so no need for weed killer."

Broughton Street was completely impassable, choked with black bamboo stalks

"Nice!" Sebastian said. He rubbed on one of Uzi's ears. Uzi put his head in Sebastian's lap and closed his eyes. "Of course the trick will be to convince people with lawns to switch over. Anyone who still has a lawn can afford to have it mowed, and sees the waste of gasoline as a status symbol. And all the people who've let their lawns go probably can't afford to plow under a yard full of weeds, reseed, and water. And lawn mower manufacturers won't like it. They'll lobby to block your patent. They might even have you killed."

The words were like spikes. Ange had never considered the political side of things.

"So what's it like? The virus." She wanted off of this topic.

"It's nice."

"Nice? So, you're happy all the time, and you don't want to hurt anyone? You'll even have a friendly chat with a terrorist? Sounds like a lobotomy."

"Oh, no. It's the exact opposite of a lobotomy. You glimpse the infinite. Just a glimpse, but that's enough. I think if I was cracked open any wider it would be intolerable. We're not built to experience all that emptiness."

"Oh, now I get it. You're basically on a permanent acid trip." She gave him the peace sign. "Peace, love, all-is-oneness."

An ultralight copter buzzed low over the square. Sebastian waited till it passed before answering. "That's about right, I guess."

"How did you get infected?" Ange asked.

"I volunteered."

"You're fucking shitting me. You volunteered to be infected with an incurable virus. Why would you do that?"

"My wife and daughter were raped and killed in front of me during the Atlanta water riots," he said with a wan smile on his face, like he was talking about an old friend he missed. "I was going to hang myself; what did I have to lose?"

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The night of the bamboo party, they dressed as homeless, which basically meant getting a little dirtier than usual, looking a little

more hopeless and depressed than usual, and hauling a couple of trash bags of belongings with them. Only mostly they were hauling bamboo roots and containers of water, wrapped inside belongings.

The crickets were in full stereo as she and Rami crossed MLK and headed up the on-ramp to I-16. Vehicles rumbled past occasionally, the drivers taking no notice of them. It was nice to be invisible; Ange thought maybe she should haul a bag of shit around with her all the time.

"Do you ever find yourself envying Sebastian?" Rami asked.

"Shit, no," Ange said. "I crave a good buzz as much as anyone, but I want to come down after." There was a nice breeze; it was almost bearable tonight.

"But he says that's not what it's like. He says he sees things clearer now than he did pre-infection."

"But it's virus-induced. Those little fuckers are doing things to his mind." They reached the interstate, walked alongside, staying in the weeds, well away from the road.

"I don't know," Rami said as he looked up and down the interstate, then stopped. They dropped their trash bags and squatted. He pulled a garden trowel from his pack and dug a hole in a bald spot in the weeds. Ange dropped a bamboo root in the hole, pushed dirt around it. She had decided to participate fully in this operation; it didn't feel as much like rape as spreading Doctor Happy had. Rami poured water over it from an old soda bottle. They headed back toward the on-ramp. It had taken all of thirty seconds.

"How are you doing with that asshole Albert?" Rami asked as they walked.

Ange filled him in on the latest; he huffed and sighed his sympathy.

"You want me to take care of him?" he asked when she'd finished. "I have friends who could soften his dick in a hurry."

Ange was tempted. He deserved to have thugs hurt him. But as she really thought about it, imagined guys breaking Albert's teeth or cutting his face with razors on her say so, it felt awful. "Thanks, but no, I have to do this myself."

"Let me know if you change your mind," Rami said.

Even before they reached downtown, they could hear it. The air was filled with cracking, splitting, popping sounds, as if the entire city was built on ice that was giving way. The other teams had been hard at work. They headed up Abercorn, under a canopy of oaks that cloaked the sky, as sirens began to compete with the hungry sound of awakening bamboo.

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The effect was breathtaking. Broughton Street, the main retail strip, was completely impassable, choked with black bamboo stalks. Just as Sebastian had said, they pushed through the asphalt and concrete like it was cardboard. Ange felt like whooping, but didn't want to draw attention to her and Sebastian.

The air smelled of blooming azaleas and piss. A group of young Dada wannabes in mock police, cowboy, and Fedex outfits strutted toward them, each sporting their own signature cool-walk. Sebastian put his arm across Ange's shoulder protectively. Ange smiled; she had a seventy pound dog with her, and Uzi had no qualms about putting a hurting on someone, whereas Sebastian cried when someone accidentally stepped on a bug, and apologized to his fucking dinner before eating it. But it was a sweet gesture.

On Drayton Street two young white kids, a boy and a girl, were dragging clumps of cut bamboo along the brick sidewalk. They turned into an empty lot between dilapidated buildings.

"Good job Emma, good job Cyril!" an old man said. He stood next to a half-finished bamboo hut, canted but looking impressively

sturdy. That was probably grandpa; mom and dad and grandma were likely dead. Ange imagined this was not how grandpa had planned to spend his retirement.

In Jackson Square, more bamboo huts and curtains. On Bull, a group of homeless, mixed with cleaner people who were probably Doctor Happy victims, cheered on the bamboo as it chewed up the street and surrounded police headquarters on East Broad. Machete-wielding cops and soldiers chopped in the blazing May heat; someone ran a ditch-digger around the perimeter of the outbreak. They looked hot, and pissed off.

"Very nice, very nice," Sebastian said. He was texting a report to the mother ship in Atlanta while they walked. "And listen to this: a priest in Southside is being charged with spiking the sacramental wine with his Doctor Happy-infected blood. Wonderful."

Some of those infected seemed to feel it was their duty to give it to others – biological evangelists, spreading the word of peace and joy and all-night street parties. Mothers poked their children with bloodstained pins while they slept.

It crawled up Ange's spine.

On Whitaker, a tank was tearing through the outbreak easily, blazing a trail for troops and shoppers. But there weren't many tanks in Savannah, and tonight Ange and the others would plant more bamboo.

There was a party raging in Pulaski Square. Twenty or thirty revelers were pounding on drums and trash cans while others circled them, doing some sort of square dance, hooking arms with each other. Ange also saw at least two couples fucking right in the open. Opposite the square three cops stood on the sidewalk in front of a drug store, automatic weapons dangling from their fingers.

Ange caught a glimpse of movement on the roof above where the cops were lounging: hands, dropping something. A white oval plummeted, hit the sidewalk with a splat right at the cops' feet. Blood splattered everywhere. A blood-bomb – that was a new twist.

It drenched the cops, the sidewalk, the side of the building. The cops lifted their weapons, pointed them all over, looking for an assailant. Then they seemed to notice that they were covered in blood. They wiped frantically at their eyes and lips, cursing, looking scared as shit.

Shouts and laughter erupted from the crowd of partiers. The square dance dissolved; some of the revelers trotted toward the cops.

"Welcome to reality!" someone shouted.

A lanky guy wearing nothing but a loincloth that looked like a diaper ran up to one of the cops and patted him on the shoulder as others crowded around, cheering.

The cop pressed his automatic weapon into the lanky guy's gut, and fired. The guy staggered backward. Before he even hit the pavement, the other cops were spraying gunfire into the looming crowd. Screams lit the air; people crumpled, slammed into each other in the frenzy to escape.

"No!" Ange and Sebastian shouted simultaneously. Sebastian moved toward the melee; Ange grabbed his elbow and yanked him in the other direction, toward cover.

One cop's head suddenly snapped back; chips of scalp and brain sprayed on the drug store window. The cop went down as the window shattered. Ange looked all around, trying to figure out who was firing on the cops. She spotted the flash of a muzzle from inside a copse of bamboo half a block behind them.

Two men stepped out of the bamboo – Jumpy-Jumps, with rifles raised, peering through scopes. The other two cops convulsed, their already blood-soaked bodies blossoming fresh as they fell to the pavement.

Sebastian was on his knees. Ange thought he'd been hit in the crossfire, but he was only crying, his face buried in his palms.

Back home, Ange showered before joining the others in the living room to watch the news. They watched footage of hundreds of Jumpy-Jump gunmen swarming the bamboo-choked streets of Chicago, then of a tank firing on insurgents in San Antonio. The Dadas were taking advantage of the chaos, spreading even more chaos.

What terrified Ange most were not the images, but the reporters' voices. The usual calm, even cadence was gone, replaced by shrill, breathless, unpolished descriptions that gave Ange the feeling that they might drop their microphones and run at any second.

"Did your Nobel laureate leaders tell you to expect *this*?" Ange asked Sebastian as they watched.

"It was one possible scenario that was discussed, yes. It draws energy away from the large-scale conflicts that are bubbling, and weakens the central government. In the long run those are good things."

Ange got up and went to bed.

She drifted off to sleep with her window open, serenaded by the ubiquitous crackle and pop of the bamboo, which drowned out much of the gunfire, and the screams of the night victims.



By morning, things had quieted down considerably. Ange watched the news reports with the others. The Jumpy-Jumps had melted back into the general population, though the bamboo was still spreading.

"Hey gang," Chair said, muting the TV. "I've got something I want to say. I've given this a lot of thought. I've decided to join Sebastian and the Doctor Happy contingent." He pulled a pin and a vial of blood out of his fatigue jacket, lay them on his lap. "I wanted my friends to be here when I did it."

Ange couldn't believe what she was hearing. Not Chair. Chair was stronger than any of them. "You're kidding, right?" she said. "You're going to give yourself a permanent Valium drip, join the drunks in the square? You're better than that, Chair."

Chair flicked a lighter, held the pin over the flame. "I think I've earned a little respite. I watched my legs get blown out from underneath me. Got a shiny new pair from the government, who didn't mention that they wouldn't pay to keep them working, that the parts would become obsolete. Watched my brother die from the flesh-eating virus."

He glared up at Ange. "Look at you! None of this has touched you." He flung the lighter across the coffee table; it bounced, hit her in the knee. "Young, beautiful Ange, worried about getting letters after her name. Believer in the cause, but afraid to make too much of a commitment lest it tarnish her career. Don't you dare judge me!"

He dipped the pin into the vial, held it up, its tip bright red, then jabbed it into his shoulder, deeper than necessary.

Despite the bamboo and the recent unrest, the grocery store miraculously had both coffee and chocolate to salve the burns Chair had inflicted the night before, so Ange felt pretty good as she hit the street.

An old man was shuffling past the electric doors of the grocery store with a shit-eating grin on his face. He saw Ange looking at him, approached her and put a palsied hand on her shoulder.

"I'm 82 years old, and I just realized that everything I've believed all my life is wrong!" He said it hard-of-hearing loud, then burst out

laughing and continued on his way. Likely off to join his comrades in the square. Ange turned to untie Uzi from the bike rack.

Uzi was gone.

"Uzi?" she called, looking up and down the street. She shouted his name in rising volume. No way, he wouldn't run away even if he got loose. Not Uzi. But he must have – who would steal her big old mutt? She ran to the corner, a plastic bag of groceries bouncing off her thigh, and looked up and down the cross street. Nothing. Bamboo choked Whitaker two blocks north, but Uzi certainly wouldn't go into that tangle.

She called Chair, who promised to call Rami and Sebastian and fan out to look for Uzi. Then she started searching, street by street.

"Shhh, shhh, we'll find him," Rami said, his arms wrapped around Ange as they sat on the steps of their house. The sun would be down in a few hours. Uzi would be alone, in the dark.

An electric wheeming announced that Chair was coming around the corner. Ange stood, staring at the corner, willing that Uzi be the first thing she saw, straining impatiently on his leash because Chair was moving too slow for him.

Chair was alone. He looked at Ange hopefully as he rounded the corner; she shook her head no, and he pounded the arm of his

An explosion ripped the air, throwing up fire and dust and chips of asphalt

wheelchair. Sebastian and a few of the others were still out. There was hope.

"He's okay," Rami said. "There are a thousand strays wandering the streets. No one would take him, he just got loose. We'll find him."

Ange spotted Sebastian, alone, heading toward them.

Then she heard a whine coming from the other direction, and snapped her head around, seeking the source. It had come from the square, but there was nothing there. Just as she began to suspect it had been her imagination, she heard it again. Then she spotted him, in the street, across the square. He was moving slowly, slowly, his head hanging almost to the pavement.

"Uzi!" she screamed. Uzi howled miserably; she launched herself toward him. Uzi stopped at the edge of the square. There was something terribly wrong with him – he looked twisted, misshapen. As Ange closed the gap she saw something dangling from his stomach.

It was a wire.

Sebastian reached Uzi first. He squatted, examining the wire. "Oh, Christ."

"What's wrong with him? What's wrong with him?" Ange shouted as she wrapped her arms around Uzi's big head. He licked her face; his tongue was dry and coarse.

"Get back! Get away!" Sebastian screamed at her.

"What's wrong?" Ange asked.

"Get her out of here!" Sebastian said. She felt Rami's arms around her waist. He pulled her backward; her feet bounced over the curb and across the grass as she struggled to get free of Rami's grasp.

Sebastian pushed Uzi, and Uzi fell onto his side in a heap, howling in pain. Ange screamed his name. His underside had been shaved, and there was a long, ragged incision on one side of his belly. Ange opened her eyes wide, confused about what was happening. It looked as if Sebastian had torn open the incision and was pushing his hand inside Uzi.

A moment later he was up and running, clutching a clump of

something. Of what? Of Uzi? Ange's exhausted mind thought maybe it was a puppy. Sebastian hurled whatever it was down the street. A trailing wire spun in the air. The thing hit the pavement, bounced twice, then lay still.

An explosion ripped the air, throwing up fire and dust and chips of asphalt. Pebbles rained down through a cloud of smoke.

Ange ran for Uzi. She reached him in time to feel his breath on her skin, to see one final, misguided attempt at a lick that missed badly, then he twitched and lay still. She held his head and rocked him, looked over to where Rami was helping Sebastian stand. There were a dozen small spots of blood on Sebastian's face, but he didn't look badly hurt.

Ange felt a hand on her shoulder. It was Chair.

"You all right?" he asked.

Ange put her hand over his, clutched it hard. She felt as if someone had thrown her into a deep black hole. She could form no thoughts; there was no room for thoughts alongside the pain.

After a long moment, she kissed Uzi's nose, gently lowered his lifeless head to the ground, and stood. A crowd had formed in the square. She scanned them, standing at a distance in their white masks. Who? Who?

And then she saw him, her Jumpy-Jump neighbor wearing his fucking mailman outfit and sporting a fucking maskless grin like his horse had just finished first by a fucking nose. A wave of black rage burst through her.

She stormed into the square, pushed through the crowd until she was right in Rumor's face. "Did you do this?" she screamed. "Did you?"

He shrugged. "Who put these sharks in the water? Hard to say."

"We're not your enemy! We're on your side!"

Ange lunged at him, tearing at his eyes with a clawed hand.

The world spun, a blur of muted evening color. She hit the ground hard, his rough hand pinning her throat. She felt the urge to cough, to gag, but there was no air.

"Unclench those little fists," Rumor said, his voice ice. "Everyone is my enemy! There are no sides."

After a terrible long moment, he let go of her throat; air squealed into her lungs as Rumor turned his back to her.

"You're not going to live long in this world, little peanut," he said.

Ange struggled to a sitting position as Rami hurried to her. She screamed in rage and lunged to her feet to go after Rumor again, but Rami held her firm. She looked at Uzi, sprawled on the sidewalk, his lips pulled tight in a rictus snarl. Uzi. Who was more innocent in all this than Uzi?

Beyond Uzi, a young boy was laying down colored dots, smiling under his mask, water gun clutched in one hand. The game went on, whatever the tragedy of the moment. He raised his gun, test-squirted a girl standing forty feet away from him. Ange watched the water spurt in a tight, perfect arc...

Ange smiled. "I'm okay, let me go," she said, her voice calm. Rami let her go. She dug in her pocket and pulled out a twenty as she approached the boy. "I'll give you twenty bucks for your gun?" she said, holding the bill out between two fingers.

His eyes lit up. "Okay." He grabbed his gun by the muzzle and held it out to her. Ange gave him the bill, said thanks, and headed inside with the gun.

There was a half bag of blood in the fridge. She emptied most of the water from the gun and poured in the blood. Some of it missed, spilling across her knuckles, and over the plastic base and trigger of the gun. She rinsed her hand and the gun in the sink.

Rumor was still outside. He was talking to an Asian woman who

seemed thrilled by his attention.

"Rumor," Ange said as she approached. He turned, dropped his head in a *you again?* gesture. She raised the water gun.

Rumor laughed like he'd never seen anything so funny. "Are you going to shoot me, little peanut?"

She shot him, right in the face. He went on laughing as he turned his face from the spray, wiped his eyes. He stopped laughing when he saw that his hands were covered in blood.

"I told you, my name is Ange. My dog's name was Uzi."

She ran, because he probably had a gun, and it would be 24 to 48 hours before he would lose the will to use it. She crossed the square, bolted up York, jumping over homeless bedding down for the night.

Her phone jingled. She pulled it out; maybe it was one of her friends, cluing her in to Rumor's pursuit.

No – it was a text message from Albert: ANGE. WE HAD A DINNER DATE, CORRECT? DID YOU FORGET?

Fresh rage poured into Ange's bloodstream. Oh, had he picked the wrong fucking time to crawl up her ass. Smarmy bearded dick-head pervert Albert. Fuck him, fuck the PhD. Fuck everyone.

Blood sloshed inside the water gun as she cut right on Drayton. Why not? A cozy Swedish dinner with Albert. They could have a talk. Only it wouldn't be about twentieth century literature or Native American mythology.

He opened the door wearing a silk shirt, unbuttoned to the breastbone, exposing his hairy grey chest.

"Well finally!" he said, struggling to look suitably annoyed yet still suave and seductive. Then he seemed to notice that Ange was panting, was dressed in a sweaty T-shirt, was clutching a water gun, and had a wild animal look in her eyes. "Are you all right?"

She brushed past him, into his living room, which was decorated with modern art prints and antique fertility statues with big dicks.

"You're not going to let me defend unless I fuck you, are you?"

Albert pulled an earnest expression out of his repertoire. "Whatever gave you that idea? There's no quid pro quo. I admit, I'm very attracted to you, Ange." He took a step toward her.

She raised the water gun. He looked at it, frowning. No, he didn't deserve bliss. She dropped it on the couch.

"What's gotten into you?" he asked.

As she stood there, hating him, it occurred to her that she knew just how to get him.

"Dr Schmid told me how you take out your little mirror in the bathroom before every lecture, making sure your bald spot isn't showing," she said. "You're pathetic, do you know that?"

Albert looked at her, stunned, his beady eyes watering. "I'm not sure why you would want to say that to me. If I've offended you in some way –"

"Save it," Ange said. Her heart was pounding, her hands shaking with rage. "Everyone laughs at you. You're a joke, especially to the women you think are so impressed by you. Everyone sees through you. I see through you. You're an ugly, creepy, old man."

His lip trembled. "I think you should find another advisor."

She punched him in the mouth.

Then she left him, with his congealing Swedish fucking meatballs and his bleeding mouth. She headed home.

Every few minutes she realized that Uzi wasn't with her, and for an instant worried that she'd left him tied somewhere, before remembering afresh that he was dead. It hurt every time she remembered.

Behind a wrought iron gate, a middle-aged man in an expensive power-suit supported a girl in her early teens who was vomiting onto an azalea bush in full bloom. The man was saying "Oh no" over and over. The vomit began to turn pink. Ange moved on. She

started to cry.

She passed an exhausted-looking woman with a toddler in one arm, a bulging plastic trash bag full of their stuff in the other. Ange looked away, embarrassed that the woman might see her crying. She didn't cry often.

She thought of what Chair had said to her last night. It had never really touched her before. None of her friends or family had died. It was all around, but it was like a movie. Not real. Stage blood. Actors. Her PhD was real, executions and flesh-eating viruses were not.

Uzi's blood was real though, and now all the blood was real, and her PhD was not.

There was knock on her bedroom door. "Ange?" It was Rami's voice. She opened the door. He was grinning.

"Come on," he said, putting an arm across her shoulder, leading her down the hall.

"What?" she said.

"You'll see."

Her mother was in the living room, and her brother, and her friends.

"Welcome," Chair said. He waved her forward, held up a sheet of paper and read from it. "By the powers vested in me by your friends and family, by the laws of reason and logic and justice, and by the Science Alliance, I hereby confer upon you the degree of doctor of philosophy in botanical biotechnology."

He handed her a rolled document with a little bow.

Tears streaming down her face, Ange opened the document as everyone clapped. It was signed by all of her friends and family – even her grandparents (though not her bitch aunt).

Ange hugged everyone.

"I'm in," she whispered as she held Sebastian. "I'll see you in Atlanta."

She hugged Chair last; he held her and rocked her as she cried and cried.

"There's one more person who wants to congratulate you," Chair whispered in her ear.

"Who?"

"Outside. Front door," he said.

She let him go, and went outside. She froze.

Rumor was sitting on the steps. There was a puppy asleep in his arms.

"Hello, little peanut," he said. He stood, turned to face her. He was smiling, his eyes glassy with tears. "I can't undo what I did, but I hope this little one will ease some of your pain." Gently, he folded the puppy into Ange's arms. "I'm very sorry."

He reached into a pocket of the hunting jacket he wore, and pulled out a vial of blood. He pressed it into her palm.

"If you decide to join us, I wish you would use my blood –"

"No!" Ange said. "I don't want it. I'm never gonna do that." She pushed the vial back toward him, but couldn't raise her hand very far because of the puppy.

"Maybe you won't, but keep it, just in case." He closed his hand over hers. "Who knows how dark this night will get." ✨

For Angela and Uzi.

This is Will's fourth story in *Interzone*. It is set in the same world as 'Soft Apocalypse', which was shortlisted for both the British Science Fiction Association and the British Fantasy Society awards for best short story of 2005. Will has also sold stories to *Black Static*, *Asimov's*, *Postscripts*, *Strange Horizons*, *CHIZINE* and others. He is currently working on a Soft Apocalypse novel.

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The Algorithm

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God came down the river in tiny boats at appropriate intervals. Wright Morgan waited, in a tiny boat of his own, and trawled for revelation.

The river heaved dark shoulders under a coat of fog. Wright Morgan shifted on his plank and squinted into the murk. He was worried about meeting up with one of the wide barges that crawled these waters on their route from Veridon to the cities upriver. The fog was so close that even if he saw one coming, he'd never get away. Dronehorns moaned far to the city side of the river, a few downriver. Another one, distantly, upriver. Not close enough to worry about, he decided.

Wright Morgan leaned over the theoscope, the cherrywood box warped from countless trips to the river. The church only had two of these miracles, and only one was allowed on the river at a time. Another reason to not get plowed under by a barge, he thought.

Still. All this fog. Even if the 'scope picked something up, it'd be hell to find in the gloom. No matter. It didn't happen every period, right? Morgan lifted his watch. And this phase, the only one this week, was almost over. Maybe there'd be nothing today.

On cue, the brass gears of the 'scope chattered to life. They began to run their courses around one another, tight concentric orbits within orbits, until they settled and came to a stop. All four gears were dopped together, pointing portward over the bow.

Wright Morgan sighed and leaned into his oars.

The vessel was small, as expected, but heavier than usual. It was the size and shape of a barrel, though its bow and stern were tapered to guide it through the rougher water upriver. Hard brass trimmed the planks in impossible complexity. It sat heavy in the water, mostly submerged. Morgan grunted as he levered the vessel into his boat. He pointed towards shore and started to row, looking the vessel over as he went.

It appeared undamaged. Now that it was in the boat, Morgan decided that it was larger than he had thought. Most of it had been underwater. The fine cherrywood planks looked new, and the brass fittings were untarnished. It was as though the vessel had been slipped into the water yesterday, though Wright Morgan knew that it had been traveling down the river for at least a week. That's how far it was by river, from the Mountain of God down the Reine to Veridon.

Clear of the deepest water, the river's swell shallowed, became a harsh chop and the fog parted. Morgan looked back over his shoulder at the approaching city. He was running hard into the mouth of the river Dunje, and the harbor that had grown up around the confluence of that body and the Reine, where Morgan had spent his morning. This was only one of the city's three harbors, and certainly the busiest. The banks of the Dunje and the Reine were cluttered with towers and walls and the stepped roofs of factories and homes. The Dunje stretched away from Morgan, burrowing into the city like a canyon cut through architectural strata. The way here was busy, and even though most pilots gave the anointed ship a wide berth, the Wright had to sound his own dronehorn several times to clear his path.

"A large one," Wright Hamil said, then slapped the side of the vessel, rocking it in the iron cart. "Any trouble finding it?"

Morgan shook his head. "No, not really. The fog was bad, but the 'scope found it."

"Of course. Well, good haul, Wright. A hand?"

"Certainly." Morgan moved aside, and he and Hamil leaned against the cart's handle. Together they pushed the vessel into the churchyard.

The yard was empty. There was no other traffic as the two Wrights clattered across the brickwork

"Heavy," Hamil grunted. He wasn't as large as Morgan, though he was no small man.

"Yes. It sat low in the water. Almost submerged. Cog of a time getting it into the boat."

Hamil laughed through gritted teeth. "Blasphemy in the church, Wright Morgan? With



Tim Akers



your hand on the body of God?"

Morgan shrugged. "We're not in the church, yet."

They paused in front of the door and rested their backs.

"Who's on duty?" Morgan asked.

"Wright Paulus. You can take it from here? I've got to be back in the tower."

"Yes," Wright Morgan stood upright and rubbed some life into his tired hands. "Get the door."

Wright Hamil swung the massive oak door open, closing it again after Morgan and his cart had passed.

.....
The church was cool and dark. There was no pew space, no altar, no choir loft. There was machinery. Nothing more. Gears and tumblers, weighted pendulums, solid walls of coiled spring creaking and ticking in oily cycles. There were columns of whirling cogs that rose in measured cacophony from the floor, spun through the air and disappeared into a ceiling full of metal teeth. For windows there were abacisms; the apse was lined with row upon row of engrams, memories in metal and pattern. A dozen boilers squatted throughout, their tangled pipes lacing up to the spires to terminate in the clock tower. It was like a geode of cogwork, the open spaces stolen away by layer after layer of machinery, a slowly closing fist of gears.

"Wright Morgan," Paulus greeted him from a scaffolding against the back wall. "The phase is over? Already?"

"It is. But it went well."

Paulus scrambled down from his perch and weaved through the mechanical growths on the main floor. His face was streaked with ash, and the lines of his hands were grease-black. He had been in deep communion.

"Good. Let's get it open, get it distributed. I've much to do this afternoon. There's something wrong in the Cascading Mural. The timing's off. I think the cam Elder Merrill decreed that we add last week screwed up the procession."

Morgan locked the wheels in the iron cart and retrieved a hatchet from the nave, anointing it with oil. "It took a week to discover?"

"Many iterations. The error only occurs maybe, what? Every hundred or so cycles? But over a hundred of hundred, it builds up. The whole mural is out of sequence now." Paulus anointed his own hatchet and started to peel open the top of the vessel, one splintered plank at a time.

"Is it? Or is the sequence finally becoming what it's supposed to be?" Morgan smiled, a little sarcastically. He assumed the thin voice of Elder Hines. "Is the pattern simply different than what we expect?"

"If the pattern means half the cogs coming loose and spilling across the floor like a game of tumblejacks, then maybe." Paulus chuckled and gathered up the broken wood from the vessel, tossing it into a hopper to be fed to the boilers later on. "That would be an awfully random pattern, Wright Morgan."

Still in the voice of Hines. "We are not the pattern, young son, and the pattern is not in our understanding."

"Yeah." Paulus wrenched off the last plank and returned his hatchet to the nave. "That's what I was thinking. Okay, let's see what God has brought us today."

The highest compartment held a dozen slatted shelves, each one holding a cog, each cog of various material and size. The two Wrights catalogued the items, turning the gears over in their hands and speculating about their eventual placement. This one's for the Column Prosperous, they'd say, or the Eventual Scales. Perhaps the Empty Shrine, the Sequence of Open Faces. They even found the correct gear to fix the problem with the Mural.

Wright Morgan tagged the last cog from the top compartment and set it aside. "Well, the Elders will have their say, of course. But that one has to be part of the Three Walls Turning. That part of the algorithm has never made any sense."

"I don't think so. I mean, the material is the same, but..." Paulus hefted the cog and held it in the palm of his hand. "The period is no good. The teeth are too wide. No, I'm afraid the Three Walls will remain a mystery for now, friend Morgan." He shook his head and returned the cog to its place with a thoughtful look. "Where that one is going, though, I haven't a clue. The Elders..."

"Paulus," Morgan said.

"Yes, I know. The Elders, the Elders, the Elders." He waved his hands in exasperation. "It gets old, but it's true. That's their position, they've earned it. And in time, it will be our position as well."

"Paulus, fucking cogs shut up and look at this." His voice was a whisper.

Wright Paulus wrinkled his brow and came to stand by his friend, looking down into the barrel of the vessel.

The second chamber of the vessel was also the last. There were no cogs in it, no levers or gearboxes, not even one of the rare caryatids or crenellated plinths that marked a major new direction for the algorithm.

There was no pew space, no altar, no choir loft. There was machinery. Nothing more

There was one thing, curled up fetal in the bottom of the vessel. A child, a girl, no more than nine years, maybe ten. She was breathing.

.....
"It was my room. But now you'll have it," Morgan said as he pushed the door open. "Not a bad place."

The room was small, the walls and floor a smooth mosaic of river stone. Most of the furniture was wood, salvaged from bits of vessel. The tiny boats that came downriver were the church's only tithe, and not a scrap of it went to waste. There was a single shuttered window, looking out over the city proper.

"A good view, I think," Morgan said, nodding outside. A bristle of towers and warehouses stretched all the way to the silver thread of the city's third river, the Ebd.

The girl inched into the room, her colorless hair brushed back, her eyes down.

"Though it's a bit cold, I suppose. Yes, I suppose you'll want some blankets or murals or something. Yes, we'll need to get some blankets in here." The girl looked cold, as though she were drawing into herself for warmth, though she hadn't yet complained. Hadn't spoken at all, yet.

She crossed the room slowly and looked out the window. Her eyes went wide. It was surprise, not fear. She back-stepped into the bed, then sat down and looked at Wright Morgan.

"Yes," Morgan said uncomfortably. "Blankets. I'll see what I can. Um. Well, I'm just down the hall, if you need me. Or anyone else. And, um, I'll see what I can find in the way of blankets. Yes."

Morgan backed out of the room, closing the door behind him.

.....
Morgan wiped the oil from his fingers with the edge of a rag and leaned away from the mural. His back was killing him, but the iterations in the troublesome wall were nearly correct. He felt pure revelation, shining down on him.

"Hey, Morgan. How goes it?" Paulus called from the floor below.

"Well, most of it is matching up. Only this one sequence left."

Paulus hauled himself up the scaffolding and settled next to Morgan. He unfastened his peer-eye and leaned in to the mural. Morgan could see him counting cycles under his breath.

"Yes. Very nice." Paulus straightened and returned the lens to his belt. "You've done well, Wright."

"The pattern has done well, Paulus, through me," Morgan said, but he smiled. His heart felt warm. Communion with the algorithm was very satisfying.

"So." Paulus patted his knees, then glanced over his shoulder at the sanctuary below. It was empty. "So tell me. The girl."

Morgan grimaced and put away his rag. "The girl. Well, what's to say. She's eating, she's sleeping. She looks out the window. She stares at everything." Morgan looked at his old friend and raised his eyebrows. "She's a mystery."

Paulus nodded. "There are whispers, you know. Theories."

"Yes."

"That she's a messenger."

Morgan shrugged. Of course he'd heard. "A messenger?" He spread his hands, indicated the mural, the sanctuary, the churning machinations of the building around them. "This is God's messenger. This is god. Yes? What would we need a messenger for?"



Paulus looked around. "Of course, don't misunderstand me. You're the one with a habit of blasphemy, my friend." The two smiled, Morgan more stiffly than usual. "But what else could she be?"

Morgan frowned then bent to the mural. The primary sequence was still off. He could feel the missed cycle in his teeth. He unfolded a timing hammer and started to fiddle with the offending cog.

"I don't know, Paulus. A child, maybe?"

The girl looked out over the impossible city and sighed, crossing her arms. Morgan set down the tray of food.

"Have you been here long?" she asked, quietly. Her eyes were unfocused. Wright Morgan raised his eyebrows. It was the first the girl had spoken to him. To anyone.

"Long? Oh, yes, for a while. In the church, you mean?"

The girl shifted and looked at Morgan like he was a memory resurfacing. Morgan thought she might have forgotten he was there, might have been talking to herself. "Oh, yes. You. In the church."

"Yes, I have. Many years. I had a complicated life, before. The church gave me. Well. A different sort of complexity, I suppose. Something to focus on."

She nodded distantly. She rubbed her forehead and grimaced. "I feel like there's something. Here. Just a little deeper than I can reach." She blinked her eyes open. "Does that ever happen to you?"

"Oh, yes. Yes." Morgan sat down on the bed next to the girl. "When I've forgotten something familiar, it's like the shape of the thing is still in my head and I can almost tell what it is by its absence. Is that what you mean?"

"I guess. It's like parts are missing or something. Like in your noisy room, downstairs."

Morgan laughed and stood up. "Yes, I wouldn't call it the noisy room around the others, dear. The algorithm is much more than a room or a machine or. Well. It's just something very important."

"A different sort of complexity," she smiled, and for a second Morgan felt that the girl knew a great deal more about this than

she was letting on. The second passed. "Sort of like a puzzle you're putting together?"

"Sort of. But that's true of everything, right? Everyday, everyone, every problem and challenge we face. Just puzzles that we're putting together." Morgan leaned down and patted the girl on her head. "Like you. You're just a puzzle. And we're trying to help you get back together."

"Hm. A puzzle of missing pieces." She mumbled.

"Now, eat your soup, your bread. And rest. It will all come back."

"Yes. I hope."

"The girl is talking," Morgan said from the doorway. The Elders turned to look at him.

"And?" Elder Hines asked. "What is she saying? Does she have..." Hines paused, looking around the room at the other elders. "Does she have anything to say. To us?"

Morgan shook his head. In the weeks since the girl's arrival, Morgan was the only one of the Wrights she seemed comfortable around. It was no surprise that she would speak to him first. "I don't know. If she's really from, you know. The Mountain. But she seems just a girl. A child."

"A child, of course a child. But what does she say?" Hines asked.

"What are you expecting, Hines?" Ganthony said from the back of the room. He shouldered his way forward, glancing at Morgan distastefully. Elder Ganthony had a clear opinion on the role of Wrights and Elders in the church, and was uncomfortable with one of the lesser members playing such a prominent role in this matter. "A sign, is that it? A miracle? Some message from the Mountain of God, instructing us on the algorithm. Teaching us? From this," he waved one hand, "this girl?"

"Elder Ganthony, I don't..." Hines started to stand.

"She could be anyone." Ganthony looked behind him, seeking and finding approval among some of the other elders. "She could be a trickster, a thief. She could be a stowaway."

"I don't think...I mean..." Morgan stammered. "The vessels are sealed. How would a girl..."

"You're making decisions before you have any evidence, Hines. You're looking for signs in a child. There's nothing about that in the algorithm. Do you deny that?"

"I don't. I just. It seems so incredible. Where is she from, if not the Mountain? What is she, if not a sign?"

"Well. Well. That's what I mean to find out." Ganthony nodded and smiled.

"I just think..."

"Elders. Eldest. Hold on a minute. Just hold on. We don't even know what she's said." Merrill stepped between Hines and Ganthony, a thin hand on each of their shoulders. "Tell us, Wright. What does she remember?"

Morgan shuffled his feet. As angry as he was at Ganthony, at his distrust of the girl, Morgan was nervous. He was usually only around this many elders when he was in trouble.

"Fragments. Images. Nothing complete, but the things she remembers are. Well, they're incredible."

"Incredible. Well then, I suppose you'd better tell us," Merrill said. The rest of the Elders in the circle nodded.

"Certainly, but I'm not sure I understand it myself. All of her memories are, well, pieces. Pictures. A river in a pipe, powering pistons as large as this building. Streets of cogwork, dark tunnels knitted in iron. And gears." Morgan paused to make the holy sign. "Gears of such size."

Elder Ganthony huffed. "I don't like where you're going with this,

Wright.”

“I’m not going anywhere, my Elder. I’m just telling you what the girl said.”

“Of course. And you’ve formed no opinion of your own, I suppose.”

“Ganthony, hush.” Hines twisted around to stare down the younger man. “These are serious matters. We don’t want –”

“I have,” Morgan spoke up. “I believe the girl has seen God. I believe that she’s a part of it.”

Ganthony nodded and crossed his arms. The rest of the council leaned back. There was a profound quiet, like a great exhalation that did not end.

“We must speak about this habit you have for blasphemy, Wright.”

“It isn’t. Listen to what I’m telling you. The things that she’s seen.”

“The things you’ve described could very well be found inside this church, and a clever girl...”

“A river in a pipe! Hundreds of feet high?” Morgan held out his hands.

“An exaggeration, I’m sure. Come on, Morgan. Hines, surely you see what’s happening here? The girl snuck herself into the vessel.”

“And then sealed herself in?” Morgan asked.

“Or was snuck in by someone else, somewhere on the vessel’s journey.” Ganthony waved his arm impatiently. “And now here she is, surrounded by godly men, and she’s come up with a way to take advantage of that. It doesn’t take much imagination to dream up her little story. Really. Pistons the size of this building?”

“Perhaps,” Hines said. “Perhaps. But these things demand a careful viewing. The pattern...”

“The pattern has nothing in it about stowaway girls! Nothing that we know about the algorithm predicts this.”

“And we know so little, Elder. So little.” Hines sat down and crossed his hands on his thin knee, leaning back to look up at the ceiling. Morgan shifted uncomfortably on his feet.

“We cannot dismiss her,” Hines said some moments later. “We can not take the risk of losing such an insight.” He leveled his gaze at Ganthony. “We can not take the chance.”

“Yes, Eldest,” the circle whispered, with varying degrees of commitment. Ganthony was silent.

“We must test her. We must find out what connection she may have to God.” He glanced at Morgan before addressing the rest of the circle of Elders again. “And from there? Well, we shall see.”

.....
The Elders stood in a circle, the girl at their center. Everyone was quiet.

“I’m sorry if this is awkward, my dear,” Hines said from his seat directly in front of her. “But you’ve raised some complications. We’re going to need to ask you some questions. Is that alright?”

The girl stared intently at her feet, then shrugged.

“Right.” Hines unfolded his long hands and drew out a card. Each of the Elders had provided a single question to be asked, with additional inquiries to be submitted, depending on how the dialogue developed. Hines shuffled through the stack, then selected a card.

“How did you come to be in the vessel?” He looked around the room slowly, finally settling his eyes on the girl. “Let’s start there. How did you get in the barrel, and when?”

She rocked forward and back, from her heels to her toes, never taking her eyes off the ground.

Elder Hines leaned forward. “Do you remember? You do remember, don’t you?”

There was a shifting among the other Elders, and nervous rustl-

ing of fabric and discontent as men thumbed open pens and ruffled cards, anxious to ask more questions, anxious for the girl to answer something, anything.

“Do you, dear?”

“I’m sorry, no. I don’t,” she said quietly.

“Well. I suppose –” Hines began.

“You’re saying, then, that you’re not a stowaway? That’s your claim?” Ganthony asked from his seat to one side.

Hines cleared his throat, loudly shuffled the questionnaires that the other Elders had filled out, then tapped the stack on his desk. “Elder Ganthony. There is a pattern at work here, and I –”

“You and your friends, I don’t suppose they found the vessel. In some river grass, or maybe tangled in a fishing net. That’s not what happened, hm?”

“Ganthony. Enough. We have agreed.”

“Why would I, why would anyone? Seal themselves up in a barrel?” the girl sputtered.

“Yes, why. Why, girl. That’s what I’m interested in. Why did you?”

“But.”

“Ganthony. Quiet. You will be quiet, or you will leave the assembly.”

Elder Ganthony shrugged his broad shoulders and scowled. Sev-

She had spoken so clearly, like a voice recorded on an engram and played back

eral other Elders, sympathetic to Ganthony and highly suspicious of this little girl, of what her presence in the vessel meant to the order of their church, shifted angrily in their seats.

“Now. Apparently that’s a bit too controversial. Let’s see if we can...ah, yes –” Hines raised a card – let’s start with something easy. Your name. What’s your name?”

The girl glanced at Ganthony nervously, and then at Hines. “I don’t think I have a name, Elder.”

Hines sighed. “You’ve forgotten it, you mean. Everyone has a name, dear. Well. We’ve got to call you something.” He looked around the Elders, his eyes finally settling on the ceiling. “You know that most of the Wrights are calling you Miss Camilla, yes? Cam?”

The girl smiled. “I...Yes, I heard that. Morgan calls me that.”

“Would it be alright, then, if we called you that as well?”

“It would.”

“Well. One mystery solved.” Hines flipped slowly through the questions he had been given, looking each one over before turning to the next. Finally, he set them down.

“We’ve heard a lot about what you don’t remember, so far. Let’s try a different tack. Tell me, Cam, what *do* you remember? Before we opened the vessel?”

Cam sighed. She plucked at the hem of the robe Morgan had made for her. “I remember the boat. Vessel. I remember waking up and seeing Morgan. Wright Morgan. And the smell of hot metal. Part of the river, too. I remember that, but it’s different somehow. Like I was dreaming it.”

“You were delirious, perhaps?” Hines prompted.

“Or stoned,” Ganthony muttered.

Cam ignored him. “That doesn’t seem right.” She was clearly more comfortable now, her nervousness lost in the conversation. “Though I suppose that might be it. Yes, I must have been delirious.”

“And before the river. What do you remember?”

Cam dropped her eyes again. Eventually, she spoke. “You know.”

“Morgan has told us many things. Unbelievable things. I’d like

to hear it from you." Hines nodded to the room. "I think we all would."

The room was quiet. Finally, Cam straightened her back and spoke to the ceiling.

"A river flows like a waterfall through a pipe of cold iron. That pipe is as big as this building, all the way around. Bigger. It's hundreds of feet tall, and there're leaks at all the joins, like the weld is going rotten. The water springs out like, like rain. The floor is covered in water, feet deep. The pipes that come off it, they're old. Falling apart. And the room. It's huge and dark. I can't...can't hear anything, in this memory. But it must be terribly loud."

The circle of Elders was quiet. She had spoken so clearly, like a voice recorded on an engram and played back. Now Cam seemed to fold in on herself, like telling the memory had somehow depleted her.

"I can't believe we're listening to this...this *drivel*."

"Ganthony." Hines's voice was tired and angry.

"No, really. Really. Do you know what she's saying?" Ganthony leaned forward and pointed a blunt finger at Cam. "Do you know what you're saying? You're claiming to have been inside the Mountain of God. Inside God!"

"Well, what are we here? Building God around us, aren't we?"



Merril asked. He kept his eyes down, though.

"There are no people inside the mountain. It is hidden from us, from all of mankind. Hidden, forever, until the algorithm is solved and the pattern is complete. That is the prophecy."

"That is the translation, Ganthony. The solution so far. But maybe there is more."

"Enough. You know better, Hines. We all do."

And Ganthony was right, as far as it went. The Mountain was a mystery. In fact, they only theorized it was a mountain, because the Reine had its headwaters among the mountains to the north. Pilgrims had gone upriver to find the source of the vessels, calculated the approach of the tiny boats, searched the tributaries and headwaters of the Reine. The cities upriver considered the vessels bad luck, had stories about the wooden and brass eggs that had hatched into monsters. Only mighty Veridon dared pluck them out of the Reine, before the vessels tumbled down the massive waterfall that roared within sight of the city, the famous Breaking Wall. But for all their searching, all their calculations and their devotion, no one had found the source of the vessels. They simply appeared, bobbing to the surface, deep in the mountain streams that fed into the miles-wide Reine.

"It would be a miracle, to have someone who came from inside. A revelation." Hines smiled broadly.

"A blasphemy. A lie." Ganthony stood up. "I call for the test."

"Take your seat, Elder." Hines hid his face under his hand. "Okay, yes. I suppose the test. Wright!"

The door to the room opened and Wright Morgan came in, pushing a ceremonial iron cart. The nearest Elders stood and pulled aside the desks. Morgan pushed the cart into the circle, which closed behind him.

"Him? Must he be here?" Ganthony asked.

"It was a request of the girl's. Now, if you protest?"

"No. He must stay," Cam said.

Ganthony looked surprised, squinted at the little girl, then shrug-

ged. "Fine, fine. Let it be."

"Fine. Now, Miss Cam. We have some things here. Do you recognize them?" He motioned to the cart.

The surface of the cart was neatly arranged with bits of machine. Cogs, hammers, timing chains, pulleys, a weighted piston. Various things. They shone grease-bright in the friction lamps. Cam shook her head.

"If you are really some part of God, then these things are second nature to you. Possibly first, eh?" Hines smiled warmly. "If you would, please. Solve them."

"They're all part of a machine, then? Something you've disassembled?"

"No." Ganthony smiled. "They're just random parts. All from the vessels, pieces of God, gifted to us. His servants."

"But if they're just random?"

"There is always a pattern, dear. Every cog. And if God is with you, truly, you'll find it."

Cam cast a doubtful eye over the assorted machinery. "If there is no one answer, no single plan, well, then how will you know if I've done it right?"

Hines chuckled. "He is our God, too, dear child. We will know."

Morgan patted her shoulder. "Don't worry. You'll find it."

Cam traced her fingers around the metal, lifted various wheels and axles, tried to get two obviously incongruous pieces to fit. Ganthony and his allies began to feel confident in her falseness. She had no idea. None. There was no pattern in her. After a few minutes of watching the girl fumble around with the scattered body of God, Ganthony moved to stand up.

"This," she said, lifting a cog. "This was in my vessel."

Ganthony stopped, half in his chair, half standing in protest. He lowered himself back down and waited.

Hines raised his eyebrows and looked at Morgan. "Was it?"

Morgan shrugged. "I have no idea. Possibly. I didn't think of that."

"Oh, it is." Cam tapped the cog on her cheek, then pressed it to her forehead. She smiled, clicked the cog on her bright white teeth, then slid it into her mouth. It disappeared, cold metal meshing with her teeth.

"Ah. Yes," she said, as hidden mechanisms and memories slipped into place behind her eyes. "I remember now."

The hallway filled up with holy men, dressed in black robes and huddling in groups of two and three. Some buzzed angrily, some whispered in fear, in awe, in discourse arcane. The stone arches of the Church of the Cog echoed with their voices. They hurried away from the council chamber like a startled hive. In moments, the hallway outside the chamber was empty.

Elder Hines was the last to leave. He gathered the scattered note cards of the inquisition. He worked slowly, his old fingers clumsy. When he was done the Elder gathered up the thin hem of his robe and left the chamber. In the doorway he paused and glanced back at the two left behind. The girl and the Wright. He shook his head and left.

Wright Morgan passed a hand over his face. His fingers were white from gripping the edge of his cart. The girl was quiet.

"Why did you say that? How can you expect them to do that? They'll never take the algorithm apart. All those hours that we've spent, that I've spent." Morgan's fingers drifted over the tools at his belt, the timing hammer, the peer-eye, the instruments of his complicated devotion. He gathered himself and looked down at her. "Do you have any idea what you're asking?"

"Do you? Do you, any of you, have any idea what you're doing

here? With your little puzzlebox god?"

"You shouldn't say that. People here take that very seriously." He ran a finger down the edge of his robe. "I take it very seriously."

"I've picked up on that." The girl's attitude had changed completely. She stood upright, her wide eyes flat and cold. Her face was a mask. "You're lucky. I'm the merciful hand of..." She smiled. "God, I suppose. There are more dangerous messengers."

"What's that supposed to mean? Are you threatening –"

"You've had people upriver. You've heard the stories. Did you ever wonder why the cities north of here never touch the vessels?"

"Yes, of course. We took it as a sign of our worthiness. Our right."

Camilla smiled and shook her head. "Of course. Grand Veridon, highest of cities. Of course."

"You can't honestly believe they'll do it. Give it all up?"

"They will. They must. It isn't theirs to keep, Wright Morgan. It wasn't meant for this place. If I'd known you'd been at it so long..."

"You? If you'd known? What are you claiming, girl?" He leaned away from her, uncomfortable.

She fixed him with a stare that was pure calculation. "We, then. You wouldn't understand the difference. Either way, you've collected our missives long enough. They were meant for another place, for a people who would understand. You wouldn't believe the mockery you've made of this place."

"Then why? Why do the pieces all fit? Why is there a pattern if we're not meant to see it?"

"Because there is no pattern other than your own. Not the way you've put it, at least." Cam dusted off her hands, where the grease from the cogs had made her fingers shiny. She gave the empty cart a childish push, watched as it rolled across the room and bumped into Elder Hines's vacant chair. "They've had their time. Let's go."

Cam took Wright Morgan's hand and led him, numb and quiet, out of the room. They walked together down the hallway. All around them, in the distant halls of the church, voices and heresies were being raised.

.....
The heart of God was loud at their approach. Every Wright and Elder was present. Most of them were yelling. They drowned out even the ratcheting thunder of the Column Prosperous. Cam and Morgan entered, and there was silence. Everyone turned to them.

"You've come to assist." Cam nodded in satisfaction. "You are here to comply. Good."

"Devil!" Ganthony howled and shook his fist. His tiny face was twisted in hate. "Get out of our God!"

Cam sighed and raised her hands. "This isn't your choice to make, Elder. It's been, I don't know, whatever you call it. Decreed. From on high. I am your angel of deliverance, old man."

"Quiet!" Ganthony's voice was now a low rumble, building on itself as he went, ending in a shout. "Lying, deceitful child. You won't have it. This is our house, our church. Our pattern. Get out." A tight knot of Elders and Wrights joined him, their hands curled into fists. Elder Hines threw himself in front of the crowd.

"Stop it! Stop all of this. Ganthony, Phan, hold back. The girl has a right to speak, wherever she's from. And the truth of that will come out."

"I passed your test, Elder. Was that not enough for you?"

"Tests do not permit blasphemy, child." Ganthony strained against Hines's outstretched arm. "They do not give you a holy writ."

Cam let her shoulders slump. Morgan stepped up and put his hand on her back. The skin was cold.

"Enough. You must give this back. Do you understand? It must be taken apart and returned to the river." She raised her head, motion-

ed to the whirling murals, the huffing boilers. "It is not yours."

"And a child, a girl, will not take it from us. Not with some clever tricks and –"

"A sign. That's all you get." Cam straightened up. Morgan, with his hand on her back, felt things slip, shift. Her skin became forge hot. He stumbled back.

Camilla slumped over and let out a long breath, an exhalation that seemed to start in her heels and travel up and out. It emptied her of everything Morgan recognized from his week spent caring for the little girl she had been. Her face slackened, her eyes died, the blush of her cheek frosted over. She straightened again, and grew.

It started with her face. She looked up to the ceiling and the plates of her face separated, like the parts of a complicated mask coming apart. A crown of iron circled her head and her hair took on whip-wire life. The lashes of her eyes fanned open into metal leaves. Her teeth and tongue disappeared in puzzlebox trickery.

The rest of her evolved with clockwork precision. Her arms and torso scissored open, got longer and thinner. Her robe tore, but beneath there was nothing but cold porcelain and metal. Her skin had frozen, slid aside and shuffled away, to reveal chain and darkness.

She rose up and cast her arms wide. Her back opened and unfolded, fans within fans clacking apart, cogs sliding in place and telescoping. They became wings with sharp iron talons and impossibly thin feathers of milky white porcelain, translucent. She stood before them, exultant.

"There are darker angels," she whispered, and her voice was the sound of scissors scything closed.

The Wrights and Elders fell back, Morgan on his knees, Ganthony and Merrill covering their heads and crying out. She towered over them now on thin piston legs. Her eyes flashed with heat.

"This is your sign. This is your message. I come to you from the mountain of your God. This house must fall. These things, all of them, must be returned to the river."

There was silence. Even the steady boilers and cogs seemed to pause in their cycles, waiting for one of them to speak. They cowered in their robes. The men hid among the machinery of their God, and waited for someone, anyone, to act. To appease this vision. Finally, it was Morgan.

He stood up and placed his hand on Camilla's quivering wing. The metal veins were warm. She flinched away, then loomed over him.

"Wright Morgan. The mantle of your God is upon you. Will you return to him what you have taken, the puzzles that you have waylaid and misused?" Camilla's voice was hollow.

Morgan lifted a shaking hand, wrapped it around Camilla's arm. The exposed machinery of her transformation bit into his fingers, drawing blood.

"I cannot," he whispered and closed his eyes. It was, he realized, all true. She was from the Mountain, from the heart of God. It was true, and this must all come down. Wright Morgan felt his life empty out, saw the church barren, clean. Simple. "I won't." He turned to his fellow Wrights, to the Elders on their knees, then threw both arms around the risen girl's waist and knocked her to the ground.

Merril and Paulus, Hines and Ganthony and Phan and all the rest. They stood up. They anointed their hatchets in oil. They didn't waste a sliver of what God had given to them. His servants. ✧

Tim wrote this story in a lined moleskine notebook with a brushed aluminium Lamy Studio fountain pen and antique brown ink. 'The Algorithm' is the fourth story set in the world of Veridon, and the third to appear in *Interzone*. Tim lives in Chicago with his wife.

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Tales from Earthsea missed its moment twenty years ago, when Hayao Miyazaki proposed a film of the original trilogy as the followup to Studio Ghibli's debut release *Castle in the Sky*. Knowing nothing of anime, Le Guin declined, and Miyazaki made *My Neighbour Totoro* instead while Le Guin went off and did a Foundation number on herself with the revisionist *Tehanu*. When she finally saw and fell in love with *Totoro* a decade later, she offered the rights to Miyazaki, by then busy with *Spirited Away*; but by the time that was out, there were not only two more Earthsea books, but inconvenient competition from the legendarily awful 2004 Hallmark TV

version, so that Miyazaki chose to take over the direction of *Howl's Moving Castle* instead as his swansong before the most serious of his periodic attempts to retire from filmmaking. Le Guin was persuaded to let Miyazaki's son Goro make the Earthsea film, in the belief that Miyazaki senior would be retired but involved; but the old control freak found himself unable to endure such a role, and the tension erupted in a startling denunciation by Goro of his workaholic father's failures to his family, while the elder Miyazaki came storming out of retirement to make his goldfish movie *Ponyo on a Cliff*.

Expectations of Goro Miyazaki's

Tales from Earthsea have therefore been understandably cautious. It was made, at worrying speed, by a studio secondary-marketing suit who had not only never written or directed but had never even worked in animation. Japanese reaction to its release last summer was mixed, and it took home a punnet of local Razzies, including worst director and worst film. Le Guin herself was diplomatic, but dismayed at the mangling of her plot and characters to the detriment both of the logic of the story and of some of the series' key values; in particular, she was aghast at the use of violence both as a narrative value and as a means of resolving conflict.

So it's rather a relief to find that *Tales from Earthsea* is for all its fumbles a moving, atmospheric, tonally authentic and often ravishingly beautiful love-letter to the books. Despite the minimal animation and often impressionistic backgrounds, it looks and feels utterly like Earthsea, with its wide starlit skies and background horizons of shoreline. Confusingly, *Tales from Earthsea* is the one book left untouched. The unspeakable Hallmark version ("Are you having one of your visions again, Ged?") contented itself with butchering the first two books, leaving the Ghibli team first pick of the magnificent but distinctly less commercial *Farthest Shore* and the three variously problematic



The waters return in force in Arkmage movie **Evan Almighty**, which offers the grim spectacle of a film you can't believe anyone ever wanted to make, at a cost nobody ever wanted to spend. What everyone thought they were ponying up for was a sequel to *Bruce Almighty* in which Jim Carrey's character from the 2003 vehicle got the call to build an ark with Jennifer Aniston and save, if not the world, at least the teaming of two hugely powerful comic talents. But despite the return of Carrey's regular director Tom Shadyac, both leads caught the unmistakable whiff of turkey and jumped ship, leaving rising star Steve Carell to take the bridge while the budgetary flood level inched ever closer to the symbolic \$180m mark (aka One Whole Lord of the Rings).

Like its predecessor, *Evan* marks a serious attempt by Hollywood to engage

directly with the faith of the majority of its audience while somehow contriving to cause offence to none. In this it only partly succeeds, as even this ferociously toothless film has its gums clamped round issues of fairly huge and disturbing significance, especially now that three out of ten candidates for the Republican nomination have come out as refusing to believe in evolution. (Carell himself had to blench and wriggle when asked at a press conference whether he believed in a historical flood, chillingly aware that every possible answer would wash away huge swathes of whatever audience was left for the film.) It certainly couldn't have come up with a more topical premise than an ambitious young congressman being bothered by God with the inconvenient truth about a coming environmental catastrophe. But at the end God comes out as a climate change

MUTANT POPCORN NICK LOWE

afterthought volumes; so what the film does is to fold key elements of *Tehanu* and a glimpse of *The Other Wind* into the plot of *The Farthest Shore*, with *Wizard* and *Tombs* more lightly, though pointedly, alluded to in the service of a sense of depth and backstory. Hayao Miyazaki's *Shore*-influenced 1983 manga *Shuna's Journey* is credited as an additional inspiration, and the echoes of Miyazaki senior are sometimes disconcertingly strong, as in Cob's henchmen's resemblance to the air-pirates from *Castle in the Sky*; but there's also a lot of disarmingly open homage to Ghibli co-founder Isao Takahata, particularly his *Little Norse Prince* and the organic-farming parts of *Only Yesterday*.

This composite sourcedness is important, because simply as an adaptation of *The Farthest Shore* it makes some very odd choices, beginning with the elimination of the *Farthest Shore* in both its geographic and its eschatological manifestations. Bizarrely for an *Earthsea* film, the action is almost entirely landlocked, with Cob's lair and Tenar's farm both relocated to Wathort from their opposite ends of the archipelago, and the entire quest spent tramping across a single island. The second-greatest of all fantasy maps, and the sense of world and place it underpins, is never even seen; instead, we have a heroic trudging movie in the tradition of *Fellowship* and *Eragon*. The

climax in the Dry Land, seed of the two further novels, is replaced by a swordfight over the girl with a black slime monster atop a collapsing tower: a prime example of what Le Guin's stinging foreword to *Tales of Earthsea* termed the "commodified fantasy" whose values the series implacably rejected. Cob himself is unhappily visualised as a kind of glam Voldemort, and Orm Embar is booted out entirely in favour of a quieter and post-climactic draconic money shot (the one from the poster art) calculated to baffle anyone slow to accept the later novels as canon. Lines from the novel are retained, to great effect, but inexplicably not "There is a hole in the world and the light is running out of it" – which in the canon of fantasy lines to stop the breath stands only a pace or two behind "I will take the Ring, though I do not know the way."

But if it wobbles a bit as a film of *The Farthest Shore*, it's rather a fine film of *Tehanu*, lingering boldly over the pastoral elements, and dealing delicately if elliptically with the Rule of Roke and the Vedurnan – the twin pillars of the revised mythos introduced in that novel, and of the tight retrospective trilogy constituted by *Shore* and its two sequels. Bringing Tenar and Therru into the earlier storyline is an elegant way to bridge the conceptual worlds of the first and revisionist trilogies, particularly given that the novels' timelines

overlap; and though stiffly paced and plotted, its uncertain storytelling and leisurely pacing make a strong cumulative statement of their own against the tyranny of facile western storytelling rhetoric. Even the minimalist, television-standard character animation so deplored by Ghibli fans has a positive part to play here. Anime is famous for its tolerance of stillness, of leaving characters and backgrounds unanimated, where Hollywood demands business; and though it takes some discipline not to chortle as Arren does the facepalm at the very moment Therru's song goes into a fourth verse when you think it's finally over, the film's visual and narrative patience make a beguiling overall case for the values of being as well as of doing. The English dialogue and dub have a few hiccups, and one has to grit teeth and get used to the pronunciations "Ark-Marge" and "Lebanon", but John Lasseter's team deserve credit for restoring dialogue as per the novel where lip-flaps permit, as well as for including full English credits. But this is Ghibli's best film by a younger director since Yoshifumi Kondo's extraordinary *Whisper of the Heart*, which had the unfair asset of full script and storyboards plus uncredited directorial contributions by Miyazaki himself. Goro's one serious weakness is storytelling, but he's more than earned the right to a chance to raise his game.

denier, the flood local rather than global and the result of reassuringly litigable individual misconduct, not even an act of God – so that even the responsibility for permitting the climactic New Orleans event in the heart of DC lies with a single bad-apple, corner-cutting concreteer, rather than (for example) with vehicle owners, energy consumers, and the throttlehold of the oil industry over public policy. In the end, *Evan* wears the robes of a film that interprets scripture on the model of filmmaking: "I think it's a love story," is God's startling pitch of the world-cleansing deluge to Mrs Noah, who duly goes all surrendered and falls in with the patriarch's mission to finish and launch his vessel in time for his autumn release date. The Hollywood faith is that if you build it, they will laugh; but in the real world the laughter isn't with you, but at.



The Farthest Shore is also one of the models pilfered by *Shrek the Third*, in which the return of the king to restore a realm under shadow similarly takes the form of an adolescent hero-in-the-making who fulfils his calling, saves his people, and allows the series lead to retire into obscurity at the place where he began. If it's not quite as grim as *Shrek II* and the conceit of interpolating *Shrek* into *The Sword in the Stone* has promise, the dated animation design, weak scatter gags, and relentless therapy scenes still carry their cumulative power to unsettle the stomach and grind jaw against jaw. Every time you feel the urge to applaud its celebration of fat ugly people, it shifts the action into a swamp of self-help: "Even my own dad didn't think I was worth the trouble"; "People used to think I was a monster, and for a time I believed them"; "Just because people treat you as a villain or an ogre or just some loser, doesn't mean you are one," and so queasily on. And at the back of it all, as usual, is a nasty reaffirmation of class, hierarchy, and calocracy, with only the good-looking and noble-born allowed to inherit power while the green-skinned smelly proles (marry one of them and you'll turn into one, forever) retire to their swamp and breed large numbers of babies. But it's OK, because look, it's their choice. Who says fairy stories aren't like real life?

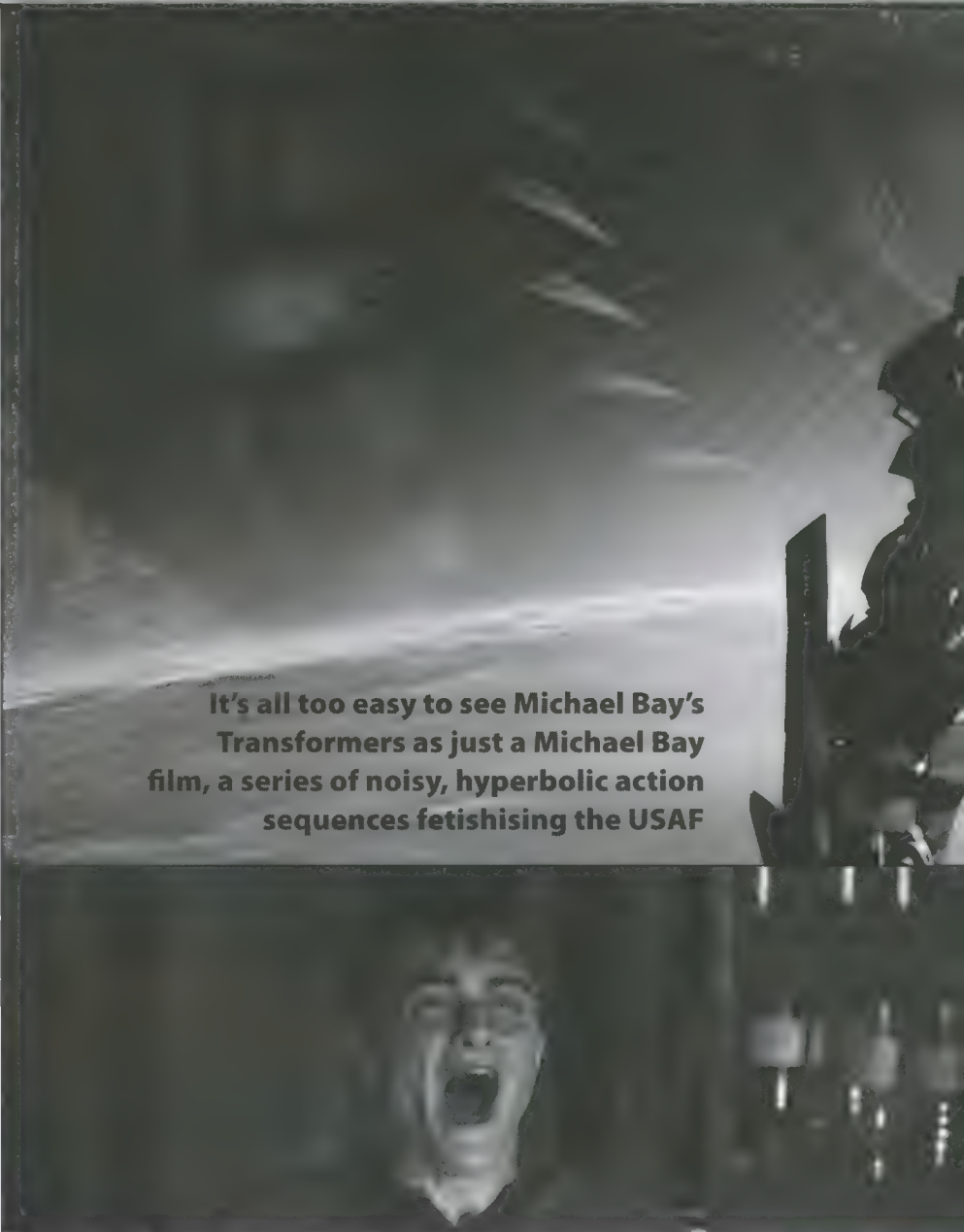
A much shinier sequel glides rides in with **Fantastic Four: Rise of the Silver Surfer**. Unfairly derided on their first outing, the movie FF are emerging as the surprising flagbearers of a brighter, bouncier Marvel movieverse that scorns adolescent angst for a back-to-basics celebration of silver-age superhero values centred on gadgetry, good humour, and a zest for cosmic science fiction. What *Surfer* has going for it that no previous Marvel movie has is three absolute killer storylines from canon that knit together naturally and almost effortlessly. I powerfully remember as a child my first sight of Jack Kirby's extraordinary cover for FF 48 on the newsstand – with its characters (including the titanic Watcher) pointing out of frame and up at a vast presence manifest only as a shadow – and knowing at once that this was the single greatest issue of anything that Marvel had ever produced. The gratuitous combinatorial power-swapping is an improvement too far, and there's a small glitch in the attempt to explain why Dr Doom would want to steal the Surfer's powers when it means the entire planet's destruction by Galactus; but the bravura episode of Reed and Sue's wedding becomes in the film version an exquisitely readymade Hollywood frame for the action film in the middle. The film has dispensed with the fondly-remembered Ultimate Nullifier and the climactic panel in which Galactus recoils from a silly-looking gubbins halfway between an oilcan and a staple-gun (Kirby was never good at handheld devices), and has come up with a different way for the Torch to save humanity by a transcendent burst of effort. And if the film's non-anthropomorphic Galactus is a disappointing rejection of the most sheerly Kirbysque character design Kirby ever created, the portentous voice and vision of Smilin' Stan and Jolly Jack at their peak is thrillingly evoked in moments like the Surfer's "All that you know is at an end". It's an affecting flashback to a shiny silver era when comics were the most exciting artform of their moment, and the FF the most exciting comic of comics.

It's all too easy to see Michael Bay's **Transformers** as just a Michael Bay film, a series of noisy, hyperbolic action sequences fetishising the USAF

Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix is a pivotal film in its franchise, saddled with the unappealing task of making a viable film out of what was until recently the most constipated book in the series, and with not just a new director but a new screenwriter sitting in for regular scriptsman Steve Kloves, who pleaded the burden of adaptation duties on a film version of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (of which, curiously, no further bark has been heard). Increasingly the *Potter* films are having to do the work that should have been done to the novels at editing stage, finding shape in the shapeless and a tellable story somewhere in the fog; and *Order of the Phoenix* let itself go badly, with rumours that Rowling had got bored

with the series. (She got her mojo back to a considerable extent in *Half-Blood Prince*, though as it now turns out only temporarily.)

In turning the series' fattest book into its shortest film to date, *Order* has had to go even further than *Goblet of Fire* in the degree to which it allows itself to reorganise and even replot, in ways that would have been unthinkable in the first couple of instalments. Some of the devices of narrative liposuction verge on the desperate, such as the relegation of large chunks of the storyline to arrays of announcements on huge plot noticeboards and clippings on a mirror. But director David Yates and script stringer Michael Goldenberg have managed, like their





predecessors, to find genuine filmic strengths in the source novels that aren't by any means apparent to the casual eye: the enormous potential, as plot focus and scenery-masticator alike, of the character of Dolores Umbridge; the huge cast of supporting characters assembled for the finale; the way Gary Oldman's performances have turned one of the most uncertainly used characters in the middle books into one of the strongest in the films. The young cast, particularly the supporting players, are developing fascinatingly as performers, in a way that not only reminds you how daring and unprecedented is this whole colossal experiment in filming adolescence in real time, but effectively mirrors the books' own attempt to grow

the genre up with its readers. If it doesn't quite match Le Guin's boldness in growing her series over a generation to mirror her readers' progress from young-adult to advanced middle age, at least the near-simultaneous appearance of *Deathly Hallows* with the *Order* film has made for some interesting and uncomfortable juxtapositions that deepen its effect. (Dumbledore's Army is a lark in this film, but the ultimately lethal consequences of its revival in *Deathly Hallows* gives it in hindsight the disturbing semblance of a children's crusade.) It's not quite *Prisoner of Azkaban*, but has more than earned Yates his custody of *The Half-Blood Prince*. It would be nice to see Goro-san get another shot of his own.

It's all too easy to see Michael Bay's **Transformers** as just a Michael Bay film, a series of noisy, hyperbolic action sequences fetishising the USAF. But it's also the most carefully thought-out toy film in Hollywood history, and a purposeful piece of mythmaking on the potent American pubertal theme famously pitched to Bay as "a boy and his car".

Since the only driving our sixteen-year-olds do is in stolen vehicles, UK viewers will inevitably connect less strongly with this fable of the peculiarly American male puberty ritual of a boy's relationship with his First Car, and the various ways in which it becomes part of his emotional body armour in the absence of everything he might actually want, including any reason for girls to show the least interest.

The central conceit of *Transformers* is that the morph of toy action robots into vehicles enacts the transformations of masculinity at the moment when cartwheels turn to carwheels and a boy has to make the move from children's toys to men's.

In this dream version, your car – he pointedly calls Bumblebee "my car" even when he's in robot form – actively cooperates with unprepossessing geeks to hook them up with fantasy babes who look like a more vacuous clone of Jennifer Connelly but themselves transform into cool chicks with secret greasemonkey skills and criminal records.

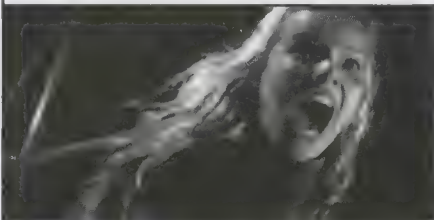
A problem with toy movies is that the characterisations have to be sufficiently skeletal to allow space for creative play, so that unless you've actually bonded with the Autobot cast in your own time their personalities and dialogue come as rather minimalist – though Ironhide makes an impression by offering thoughtful script notes ("The parents are very irritating. Shall I take them out?"), and the elderly teens aren't much better written.

Bay has worked hard at getting a modest 112-page script to transform into a 142-minute city-smashing mecha spectacle, but the rubble of earlier plot drafts lies rather awkwardly strewn around, particularly in the scenes involving Boombox and the whole purpose and point of the All Spark.

But then this is a film in which high-level technical advice is provided by a Tasmanian blonde who says things like "You need to move past Fourier transfers and maybe consider quantum mechanics" without anyone leaping in with "Surely you mean 'transforms'?" **Nick Lowe**

As he proved with the brooding *Wendigo* (2001), US filmmaker Larry Fessenden is particularly imaginative when evoking supernatural invisible menace, as when the shockingly hostile environment brutally overwhelms human-scale consciousness. Low-budget drama **The Last Winter** is no 'cosy catastrophe' for the Alaskan oil workers (including Ron Perlman, James Le Gros, Connie Britton) stranded at an isolated camp because the Arctic Circle itself is their antagonist, violently rejecting the industrialisation of unspoilt wilderness. Montage info-dumps and increasingly personal conflicts presage sour winds from nowhere and the onset of exponential climate change. Burn injuries after the plane crash adds tragic insult to frozen grief, and hysterical survivors are caught between fire and ice during the apocalyptic thaw, which releases a wraith-like fury from the brittle permafrost. Like John Carpenter's classic *The Thing* (1982), naturalistic intensely-charged performances ensure the morbid disquiet conjured by Fessenden's astutely intelligent direction is pointedly effective, leading to a shatteringly downbeat finale that chills like instant frostbite.

Out of his television success as a green-skinned vigilante from *The Incredible Hulk*, bodybuilder Lou Ferrigno acquired fantasy feature stardom in **Hercules** (1983), a Golan-Globus production directed by Lewis Coates (alias Luigi Cozzi). Unlike its big screen contemporaries, *Conan* or *Superman*, which celebrated the genuinely mythic qualities of superheroes, whether barbarian warrior or costumed alien, this colourful, somewhat bizarre, Italian fantasy combines naff space opera (gods live on the Moon) with campy adventure, signified by laughably inept visual effects, and the statuesque presence of Sybil Danning as villainess Ariadne. With Hercules' famed twelve labours often reduced to throwaway scenes, and nothing whatsoever to commend the writing, acting or directing, all the entertainment value that can be derived from this remains fixed at the level of unintentional farce or woodenly pantomimed action sequences, which don't merely invite ridicule from viewers, they make it compulsory. Although hugely enjoyable as childish Euro schlock, even dedicated fans will cringe at some of the antics.



Echo Bridge, the DVD label that knowingly tried to insult your intelligence with such Z-grade flicks as *Star Knight* (1985), *Space Mutiny* (1988), and *Firehead* (1991), now offers Tibor Takács' monster movie **Kraken: Tentacles of the Deep**. A Canadian TV production, this somewhat under-budgeted underwater horror stars Victoria Pratt (of *Mutant X*), and Charlie O'Connell, younger brother of Jerry, both of *Sliders* fame. Obsessive marine archaeologist Nicole, and ocean

photographer Ray, team up to find an ancient gold mask and a mythical opal, before modern day Greek pirate Max (Jack Scalia at his slimy best) locates the precious artefacts first. So everything's neatly set up for scuba dives to search old wrecks, criminal sabotage of boats, aggressive rivalry, and repeat appearances by a giant squid (so-so CGI), the very same beastie that killed Ray's parents. There are dismembered bodies in the water, severed tentacles on deck, and spear-gun shoot-outs with bad guys, all eventually reaching a suitably restrained but emotionally satisfying conclusion. Over the last twenty years, genre journeyman Takács has maintained a laudable track record, and this movie is a worthy addition to his directorial work.

Sheldon Wilson (maker of compelling 'invasion' movie, *Shallow Ground*) unleashes **Kaw**, an eco-thriller that benefits immensely from a sterling performance by Stephen McHattie as wretched yet crusty school-bus driver Clyde, who helps defend a small town under siege from homicidal ravens. The absurdist, chiefly incoherent narrative, concerning the results of unchecked mad-cow disease, remains strangely likeable on a messily primal level, despite a rash of hoary clichés as the body count rises, and the presence of wrinkly Rod Taylor cements a blatantly calculated link to Hitchcock's classic *The Birds*. Abundant gallows humour (of a sort entirely avoiding the distinctly British in-jokes of Conor McMahon's lively zombie comedy *Dead Meat*) brings little, and only temporary, relief from a scarily escalating situation that foreshadows inescapable doom for all.

The first volume of Skuko Murase's anime series **Ergo Proxy** has four episodes, with a mix of conspiratorial intrigues and cyber action in model sci-fi environs of a domed utopia, where emotionless citizens live, attended by entourages of androids. A clichéd feisty heroine, granddaughter of the maze city's regent, finds herself under suspicion after she inexplicably survives a home attack by the hideous humanoid monster later embarking on a killing spree. Unfairly demoted after that massacre, heroine Re-l is determined to uncover the secrets of that homicidal 'proxy'. Muted colours, and the obvious American SF influences, including *Blade Runner*, detract from enjoyment of the developing storyline, yet the borrowing from *Battleship Potemkin*'s Odessa Steps ends in tragedy for the baby. Radiohead's 'Paranoid Android' is the closing theme.

LASER FODDER TONY LEE

There's no obvious fandom consensus, but season two of Gerry Anderson's TV opus **Space 1999** is, nowadays, considered superior to the first. Its good sci-fi 'fun' is the deciding factor, whereas the earlier season was overly sombre, lacking essential wow appeal, despite its occasional moments of gravitas from regular Barry Morse as Prof Bergman (notably absent from these 24 episodes closing the show). As produced by Fred Freiberger (taking over from co-creator Sylvia Anderson), season two upped the programme's basic silliness concerning a runaway Moon – nuclear explosions kicked it away from Earth, carrying the unprepared Alpha colony on a cosmic journey, led by Commander Koenig and Dr Russell (married couple, Martin Landau and Barbara Bain) – boosting the romance, adding new characters like exotic alien 'meta-morph' Maya (Catherine Schell), and generally Americanising the format. Picking up, more or less, from where the final season of *Star Trek* (1966–9) left off, Freiberger steered the Alphans to increasingly weirder encounters (with slave traders, lonely artificial intelligences, evil doppelgangers, whip-cracking Amazons, inexplicable plagues, or uncanny monsters), much like Kirk and Spock's least serious adventures. Dealing with mutinous crew, time-travel experiments gone awry, immortal beings, hidden tombs, even a clichéd Adam and Eve scenario; while Alphans are used as templates for killer androids, or gifted with scary powers, Landau's stalwart Koenig met with sneering dismissal from the moon-base's would-be conquerors or destroyers, but enjoyed 'philosophical debates' with guest stars like Brian Blessed, Freddie Jones, Billie Whitelaw, Patrick Mower, Sarah Douglas, James Laurenson, Stuart Damon, Hildegard Neil and, finally, Patrick Troughton. The quintessential mid-1970s SF-fantasy series, this remains watchable and amusing today while most other 30-year-old genre shows, of less tolerable datedness, have lapsed into deserved obscurity.

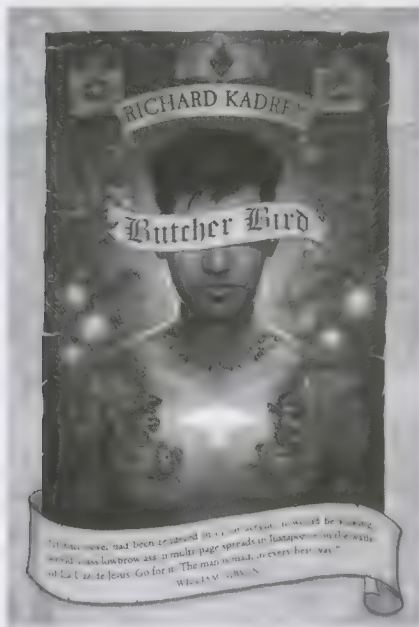


Mary Shelley's quintessential mad doctor scenario has received several new wrinkles of late. Since Roger Corman's film of *Frankenstein Unbound* by Brian Aldiss, further additions include Peter Werner's monster-mash *House of Frankenstein*, a TV mini-series from Kevin Conner, Marcus Nispel's occasionally fascinating genre variant of Dean Koontz's immortal serial killer, Leigh Scott's gory cheapo *Frankenstein Reborn*, and now Jed Mercurio, director of mediocre British TV mini-series *Invasion: Earth* (1998), also has a *Frankenstein* production underway. Aesthetically, John R. Hand's **Frankenstein's Bloody Nightmare** is more like a student's experimental project, imitative of early Cronenberg and Lynch with a torpid pace and jarring scene breaks, than a conventional horror movie. It's hardly innovative, despite randomised images of surreal decay, countryside stalkings, techno sterility, explicatory waffle, showings of the grotesque lumpy headed beast, irregular switching to discoloured negative, narratively inconvenient use of educational medical film excerpts, and intermittent – apparently unsynchronised – sound, mean this lame clodhopping zombie of a movie shuffles on so ineffectually that a six-pack of muscle relaxant is required to constrain impatience and irritation, among other unexpectedly extreme reactions that could well pose a problem even in sufficiently pleasant or distracting company. To avoid side effects like screaming fits or sudden faints due to stressful annoyance, view only while happily intoxicated.

Now available in budget-priced slim-line packs, **Star Trek Voyager** (1995–2001) was by far the best TV space opera marketed under the Roddenberry banner, partly because all ten of its main characters were instantly likeable (even hapless everyman Harry Kim), but also for the overall quality of its consistently intriguing stories, with sci-fi ideas and action-packed thrills spanning seven seasons, totalling 172 episodes. The starship Voyager's crew included a roguish Native American (Robert Beltran), a black vulcan tactician (Tim Russ), a feisty half-klingson engineer (Roxann Dawson), a smugly-brilliant holographic doctor (Robert Picardo), rehabilitated borg drone (sexy blonde Jeri Ryan), jovial alien handyman (Ethan Phillips), and a young girl psychic (Jennifer Lien). Quirky non-humans, techno-wizardry, and a convoluted Homerian epic story-arc aside, it was the female captain that really made *Voyager* such a great series. Kathryn Janeway (Kate Mulgrew, who left an indelible feminist signature on the whole *Trek* milieu) faced trickier moral dilemmas, and more personal betrayals, desperate situations, potentially overwhelming challenges or seemingly un-winnable military conflicts than any other Starfleet captain, before or since. With her scientific curiosity and independent spirit, sustained by gritty determination, and frequently devious feminine wiles, she overcame every adversity and (in more than one episode) passed the ultimate test of self-sacrificial courage with human integrity intact, while rarely abandoning professionalism or Federation ethics for expediency, during the galactic journey home. Among Starfleet officers, Kirk was the explorer, Picard the diplomat, Sisko was the cynic (while Archer was merely bland!); but only Janeway was a leader of men. **Tony Lee**

Butcher Bird

Richard Kadrey • Night Shade, 257pp, \$14.95 pb

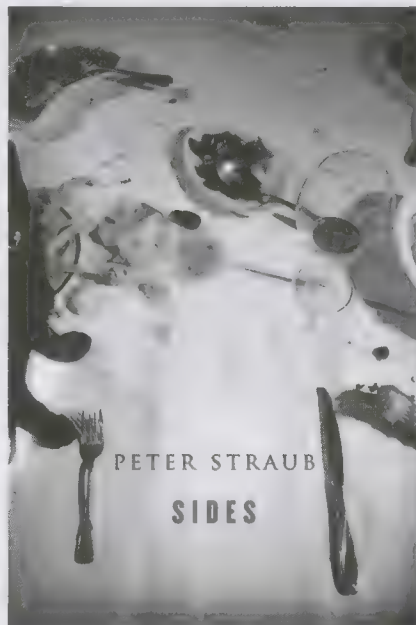


In that realm of fantastika called Horror we find ourselves, at the beginning of the tale, walking the surface of the world in a state of high anxiety until, in the blinking of an eye, we see something of the truth inside. Something shakes us loose from our fixated gaze on the things that constitute the visible world, the things of the world whose scree innards we mask and normalise and make use of and inhabit the mcmansions of. Something suddenly opens us to one of those moments of slippage whose sighting characterises the greatest Horror novels, those instants of utter horror when the true grammar of perception lies bare. It is then that 'metonymy contagion' becomes visible – this is a term which has been used in Gothic Studies to describe how the truths which lie below *attach* themselves to bits of the surface of things, Jekyll in this sense being a metonymy of Hyde, who *does* hide to keep the Doctor going – and no longer can we strut like Jekyll in daylight, for (in the blinking of an eye) we have seen the whole, the whole sees us. Which is the first sentence great Horror stories lay on us: Our lives (great Horror stories tell us) are false. Hell is not being able to forget this.

There was a moment in **Butcher Bird**,

Sides

Peter Straub • Cemetery Dance, 310pp, \$25 hb



Richard Kadrey's new novel, before its innumerable climax whams began to wear us down, when something like an exposure of metonymy contagion seemed to occur. We are in San Francisco, round about now on human Earth, which is only one of three spheres calved out of primordial Reality when the internecine warfare amongst the orders of beings threatened to end in terminal chaos; the other spheres being inhabited by all the critturs and folk humans think are chimaerial, and by angels and demons (and gods). All three spheres interjacculate, but humans cannot perceive this, even in the deep cities which are isomorphic with the First City where the initial decision to calve was taken: in *Butcher Bird*, cities are where the action is. It is a genuine urban fantasy.

In the San Francisco node of this complex universe, which Kadrey devotes several short chapters to explaining, we begin to meet some protagonists: funny foulmouthed Spyder Lee, a blockhead Loki minus Loki *nous* who has survived decades of San Francisco counter-culture, partly in the company of funny foulmouthed gay Lulu Garou, who now jointly run a tattooing and piercing parlour (throughout *Butcher Bird*, Kadrey unveils really quite

a few categories of semi-voluntary blood-letting); and the blind (but very seeing) Alizarin Katya Ryr, aka Blind Shrike, aka Butcher Bird, who saves Spyder in a back alley after a demon has attacked him, and who tells him that the demon has become visible – along with all the other denizens and artifacts of the other worlds – because the commands or releases embedded in the labyrinthine curlicues of icon and rune of the tattoos that cover his body have finally been recognized. From now on, no longer a simpleminded tattooed effigy stitched over the real, Spyder will see the world.

Back in the bar he'd just been slung out of, Spyder does now see the real Lulu for the first time. She is a shambles of evisceration. Most of her body parts have been taken by the Black Clerks who monitor interworlds transactions (the plot is thickening fast) and who had earlier solved her drug addiction problems and who were taking bits of her, bit by bit, in payment. It is more or less at this point – about forty pages into *Butcher Bird* – that a conversation takes place between Spyder and Butcher Bird, who have now slept together and stuff, and for a moment the novel shuts up and goes deep:

"My head is spinning" [he tells her]. "I have this magic juju sight and I've seen such demented shit in the last twenty-four hours. I wouldn't mind being blind for a while."

"It's not really magic sight, you know," Shrike said.

"Then what was it?"

"Memory," she replied... "Everything you're seeing now you've seen all your life only you've chosen to forget it an instant later."

Unfortunately Kadrey only allows himself to give us this preliminary hint of a central intuition about contemporary planetary Horror – that Horror is what happens to us when amnesia fails: see W.G. Sebald's *Austerlitz* (2001); for related material see Jonathan Lethem's *Vintage Book of Amnesia: An Anthology on the Subject of Memory Loss* (2000) – and starts his plot ball rolling, or, rather, ricocheting: reading *Butcher Bird* is like being caught in a pinball machine.

Spyder and Butcher Bird are soon blackmailed into going to Hell in search of the Book of True Names which contains the Story of Everything which is desired by the evil...etc. On the way through the gnarls and abysses of the world made visible, attacked by all sorts of monsters

SCORES: LOSE THE AMNESIA JOHN CLUTE

but simultaneously transfixed by living zeppelins and other steampunk epiphanies, they acquire some plot coupons and a few Seven Samurai type companions, one of whom turns out to be the Devil himself, but really he's kind of cute, in a faux-Bryonic Look No Limp! sort of way, and kind of really on their side. Good fathers and bad fathers attain closure through the actions of our protagonists, and this feels good. Spyder blindfolds himself to enter Hell and save Butcher Bird, but any hint of Orphic depths is forgotten, like almost everything else in the book as soon as it's mentioned, and it turns out that there's an exit clause, he doesn't have to keep the blindfold on, he and so baps and boings and kills and tergiversates and wins all or enough, and Hell falls (it turns out this is OK with Look No Limp!), and so on.

Kadrey is capable of great flights of energy, and does set-pieces at the drop of a hat, and his visual imagination is cunning and gonzo; and if he had been able to *manage* all these gifts within the demands a narrative crescendo (and maybe with a few more echoes of genuinely dark material welling up from the memories we blank out of the world which really exists), he could have written a classic tale, one which haunts us where we don't want to look. As it is, his sense of the world within us, the world of true sight when amnesia is ripped away, is hilariously free of consequence, pure ofshornaya zona. The most one can say about *Butcher Bird* is that it was fun while we lasted.

For reasons of decorum – the book is dedicated to me – I can't unpack all I feel about Peter Straub's *Sides*, a volume which assembles most of the introductions and afterwards and essays he's written for twenty years or more, plus one complex metafiction; but because I'm not actually referred to in the text itself – and because none of the issues we've talked about and done panels about together over the years are directly addressed here – maybe it's possible to say a few words.

Straub can be too muscular for the books he introduces – 'Are You Loathsome Tonight?' rather burns poor Poppy Z. Brite to the ground – and he can over-praise on occasion, slightly shoutingly. But his advocacy of tales like Graham Joyce's *Leningrad Nights*, or Ira Levin's *The Stepford*

Wives, or Lawrence Block's Scudder novels, or his close friend Stephen King's *On Writing*, or H.G. Wells's *Island of Doctor Moreau*, are genuinely magisterial, stunning demonstrations of applied intelligence: a rare and thrilling body English of the *committal* of high intelligence to a task.

Other pieces: 'The Fantasy of Everyday Life' is an address given a few years ago at the International Conference for the Arts of the Fantastic in Florida; sounded fine, reads better, like the confession of a writer who – as he says of Charles Dickens – is "so organized so as to require the process of putting words on paper for the sake of survival." 'Mom' is about a range of family matters, but climaxes on her Alzheimer's; as the son of a father who himself died of Alzheimer's, I could not lift my eyes from these pages as they opened to some of the amnesias I had wrapped around myself. I know I could not have written a similar piece. Enough to read it.

Sides ends with a hundred page section called 'A Proud and Lonely Voice from the Back of the Room: The Collected Observations of Putney Tyson Ridge, PhD'. These 'observations' – written by an imaginary critic Straub has created as a kind of doppelganger – are couched as a series of derogatory comments on each of Straub's books, in chronological order both of their composition and (significantly) and of their composition by Ridge (or PTR). At first glance, it is an hilarious joke, an extremely clever play on Charles Kinbote's ultimately deadly infatuation and consumption of John Shade in Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire* (1962). Straub has exactly captured Kinbote's tone in his rendering of PTR's uncontrollable jealousy, his envious condescensions, his delusional sense that he has shaped Straub's career and given him his best ideas, his constant and interminable stays in the various homes the Straubs have occupied over the years, his utter obliviousness as to the effect he has on others, his stale and furtive sexuality. All this is, of course, fiction: but it is also, of course, something else. PTR is loathsome, but sometimes he calls the shot. Sometimes he gets Straub where it must have hurt Straub to get himself that way. (Which is of course a defence. [Which is of course a confession that a defence is needed.])

It is also a commentary on critics, even a dedicated one. **John Clute**

SOME THING HAS COME THROUGH



TRANSMISSIONS FROM BEYOND

BLACK
STATIC
IS
OUT
NOW

Atrocity Archives/Jennifer Morgue

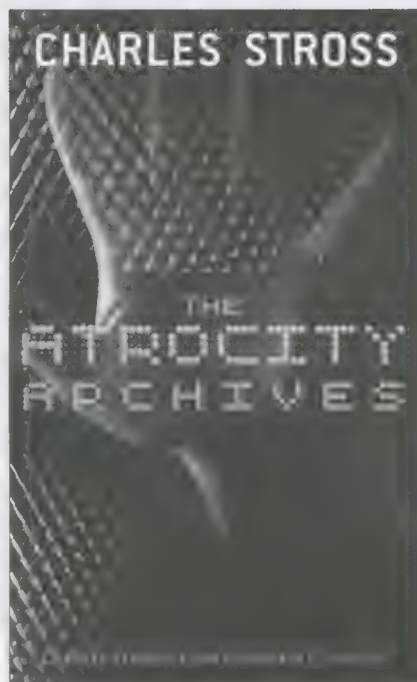
Charles Stross • Orbit, 336pp/368pp, £6.99 pb

One of the key traits of an enduring author is the skill to easily interchange writing styles, and to not limit themselves to one voice for their whole career. Gene Wolfe is one of the masters at this, able to seamlessly adapt to any style depending on what he feels is the natural angle to tell his wonderful stories. While being compared to Wolfe is a tough challenge for any author, in just a handful of novels Charles Stross has proven that his literary prowess is up there with the best. In *Singularity Sky*, Stross produced epic sf on a sweeping scale; in *Glasshouse*, he recorded a masterful analysis of social behaviour; and in the Laundry novels he has used two contrasting styles of the spy thriller to kick-start a new series – one which will immediately appeal to fans of Lovecraftian horror and conspiracy fiction.

The Laundry novels are amongst Stross's earlier works, only now seeing UK publication – the first being **The Atrocity Archives**. In *The Atrocity Archives*, every conspiracy theory you may have heard is likely to be a reality, all secretly covered up by the governmental IT department that gives its name to the series. Tucked away behind the usual political wranglings within the department is computing genius and demonologist Bob Howard, who has been recruited as an unwilling field operative and sent off to fight for Queen and country against an energy consuming Elder God and its army of extra-dimensional Nazis, who have exploited a mathematical anomaly to enter our reality.

As superbly outlandish as all this seems, the actual beauty of the book comes from the science fiction elements. The Laundry is defended and supported through a variety of technologies and arcane mathematical equations – including the implementation of magical wards in computer firewalls and basilisk weapons made from the hands of corpses. Vivid and exotic locations with carefully constructed characters serve to enhance (and often ground) this surreal combination of old school thriller and genuinely creepy horror.

Following on from the main novel is a short piece set in Milton Keynes, where Bob has to protect the identity of his secret department from forces desperate to bring it to its knees by way of concrete cows and traffic cameras. While tame in comparison to its earth-devouring precursor, it delivers



REVIEW & INTERVIEW by KEVIN STONE

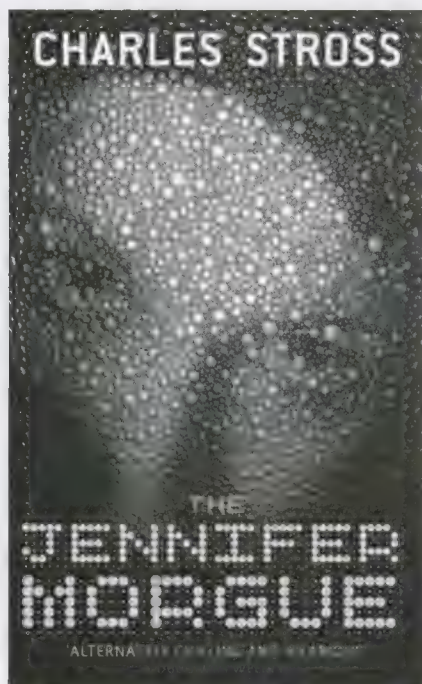
a healthy injection of black humour.

If *Atrocity Archives* is old school, then **The Jennifer Morgue** brings the series forward into the vein of more traditional thrillers – another testament to Stross's extensive research into the genre and the diversity of his writing repertoire. *The Jennifer Morgue* thrusts reluctant hero Bob into a disturbing plot by a powerful billionaire to exploit the secrets of Deep Ones and Cthonians. This time Bob's help doesn't just come from his own Government – this global threat drags The Black Chamber (the Laundry's American counterpart) into the equation, with Bob becoming psychically linked with one of its operatives.

The Jennifer Morgue is fast moving, much more action-orientated than *The Atrocity Archives* – and whilst the technologies inherent in the Laundry series are still present, they appear as 007-esque gadgets that bail Bob out in his hour(s) of need. Not only is this another gripping spy novel set in a gorgeous locale, Stross also gives the reader the chance to sleuth the conspiracy as it unfolds, leaving a variety of strands to untangle throughout, until he eventually brings them together piece by piece.

It's clear that Stross is a big fan of the classic super-sleuth tale in all its forms, and has used founding styles to construct the Laundry series, whilst maintaining all of the wit and intelligent ideas which have established him as one of the leading players in contemporary sf.

TRANSMITTING
FROM BEYOND



You have some of the most inventive ideas in modern sf. How do you manage to pack so many ideas into one novel?

The problem with ideas is that they are actually easy – I have more ideas than I have space to write them down. What normally happens is that I keep an open mind; not too open, but enough to read voraciously all over the place. Subscriptions to *New Scientist* and *Scientific American* help. I keep banging concepts together until I come up with something new; you can usually create new ideas by looking at something familiar and turning it inside out.

***The Atrocity Archives* focuses much more heavily on the science and technology behind the metaphysical than *The Jennifer Morgue*. What were your reasons for changing?**

The Atrocity Archives was aimed at Len Deighton, and for *The Jennifer Morgue* I decided I wanted to go for the Bond canon. Now, I would make a case that Deighton is the ultimate spy-nerd: his early books were very heavy on the nuts and bolts when compared to the traditional mainstream of British spy thrillers. Fleming is a sharply contrasting figure; a much lighter and more adventurous writer. Also, he tends not to question the establishment. Bond is there, he works for the relevant agency, and while the gadgets and exotic locations are visible in the foreground, there's little depth – little interrogation of *why* he's sent on the specific missions he goes on, or of the departmental politics behind them. In *The Jennifer*



Morgue I was trying explicitly to recreate a Bond experience, and it seemed to me that slowing down to look at the gnarly underbelly of the Laundry was absolutely incompatible with the Bond style.

Was it difficult to switch from the darker and more atmospheric style of *The Atrocity Archives* to the faster, sexier style of *The Jennifer Morgue*?

It was a bit of a wild ride, but by that time I already had a pretty good grip on Bob's personality – and the rest of the material just revolves around him. To some extent it's pure sitcom: we have a well-defined sandal-wearing Slashdot-reading computer geek who's fallen into spy land and can't get out, and who is being pursued by monsters from another dimension. Changing the scenery isn't hard; the hard bit is remembering to distinguish between key elements of the fictional universe (which might show up in other stories) and those which are part of the current set design.

Would you say that the Laundry series works as a tribute to these writers, as well as Lovecraft?

Yes, to a large extent. If I was to do a pitch for where I see the series going, there is an overall story arc, but they will also be a series of books which are individually homogenous to different authors of thrillers. I've done Len Deighton and I've done Ian Fleming – and I should leave you guessing who's next – but I have already figured out my targets for the next two books

At what age did you first discover Lovecraft?

Probably my twenties – although I'd read a lot of things influenced by him without knowing what it was. Lovecraft is a very interesting writer because of what he put his finger on. We talk a lot in sf about the 'sense of wonder'; Lovecraftian horror is its converse. It's the sense of horror or the insignificance of humanity when confronted with beings of a larger scale. I think we can characterise him as one of the most influential sf writers of his period, and not given enough press on that basis.

It felt like you'd toned the humour down for *Glasshouse*. Does this mark a change?

I think *Glasshouse* has a lot of dry wit and referential stuff in it, but it wasn't written as a humorous novel – it was written more as a novel of suspense and as an exploration of some rather unpleasant experiments in applied psychology, like the Stanford Prison Study by Philip Zimbardo and The Milgram Experiment on obedience to authority. With a lot of the other stuff, it's funny because the real world is funny. There's really strange things happening all around us all of the time, and I think that if sf doesn't really reflect this, if it's sort of po-faced and humourless, then in some ways it's less believable than if there's strange stuff going on. Some of my work is intended to be humorous; the Laundry novels are humorous horror if you like – black humour laughing in the face of horror. I think that it would be reasonable to say that my next sf novel after *Glasshouse* (*Halting States*, Orbit, 2008) is relatively serious.

Can you give us any details about that?

Halting States is a near future crime novel about a crime that doesn't yet exist in the hothouse of massively multiplayer virtual worlds. It's set about a dozen years in the future, and things have got very strange indeed. If you imagine what the dot-com boom would have looked like to someone teleported in from the mid 1980s, we're going somewhere even stranger – and fairly soon. The nearest book out there to it would be *Rainbows End* by Vernor Vinge. Basically, a crime has been committed inside a role-playing game. A bank has been robbed using a dragon for fire support, and the police are called in because real money is at stake. In particular, the company which has been robbed is a second tier company whose job is stabilising the economy of virtual worlds – so when their bank is robbed, the implications are rather dire. ✧

The Dreaming Void

Peter F. Hamilton • Macmillan, 652pp, £17.99 hb

Peter F. Hamilton is best when he's working on a galactic canvas; give him a universe, and he'll fill it up with complicated, technically advanced cultures, unusual aliens and labyrinthine conflicts. But what really shines in a Hamilton novel are the planetary extraction scenes. It's his strong suit to put his characters in peril and then run them through a menacing maze of angry, heavily-armed locals on their way up and out. Hamilton's set-pieces are always a highlight in his novels, and *The Dreaming Void* is no exception. He plays to his strong suit in this latest novel, the first in an inevitable trilogy set in the Commonwealth Universe of *Pandora's Star* and *Judas Unchained*, some 1500 years after the events in those novels. You'll get your planetary extraction scenes, and they'll be every bit as exciting as you could hope – but there's more going on than just action in *The Dreaming Void*. Hamilton effectively ups the ante of his usual space opera, complicating matters most entertainingly by introducing some no-longer new ideas and playing *them* to his strong suit.

The future in *The Dreaming Void* is really rather rosy. The Commonwealth is strong, and peace generally reigns throughout. A selection of aliens and humans, having defeated the Starflyer, have created a working model galactic society that is quite cleverly complicated by a variety of Singularities, both alien and human. In the years since the Starflyer War, much of humanity has taken itself beyond the realm of the physical, in what Hamilton calls 'the inward migration'. But these post-humans are not so united as one might infer from the term 'singularity'; they're much more of a multiplicity, a gaggle of squabbling factions vying for power and trying to enact a variety of agendas. Hamilton's spin on the singularity is really interesting and quite entertaining. He's not trying to re-invent the wheel, but instead giving it a style-up and polish job that is a blast to read. He creates a variety of fascinating conflicts and agendas, with characters of varying morals and abilities to carry out those conflicts. It's a great way for this writer to expand his palette and yet stay true to his galaxy-spanning strengths. Humanity may ascend, but we never seem to grow up. On the surface, however, the Commonwealth is relatively stable and secure.

But never underestimate the power of religion to destabilise matters. At the centre of the galaxy is the Dreaming Void, a sort of artificial black hole that may hold paradise within its walls. The problem is that in order to support this paradise, it's slowly consuming the galaxy. When a human named Inigo begins dreaming of what lays within the Void, the word spreads. Soon he's gone from dreamer to prophet, and as the novel begins, millions of his followers are hoping to embark on a Pilgrimage into the Void. The problem is, most aliens and humans believe that when the pilgrims drive their starships into the Void it will trigger a catastrophic expansion. The pilgrims may or may not find heaven, but everyone else gets sucked into a black hole. All that carefully-honed peace will certainly follow.

This is where the action kicks in, early and often. Suffice it to say that the sort of

set-pieces that one remembers long after having finished a Hamilton novel are here in plenitude, executed with skill, grace and verve. Hamilton's cast of characters offers some enjoyable returns from the first two novels alongside equally enjoyable new creations – he manages to create a character whose dreams are a Peter F. Hamilton planetary romance, and a damn good one. In any effort of this size, there can be missteps; Hamilton indulges his inclination for bestseller-level sex in an imaginative environment, to be sure, but those scenes tend to ground matters a little too much. And while the pacing is always brisk, readers may find themselves experiencing galactic whiplash as they jump from one side of the Milky Way to the other at a speed considerably faster than light. But let your reading mind lead, and your all-too-human brain will quite willingly follow. **Rick Kleffel**

The future in *The Dreaming Void* is really rather rosy. The Commonwealth is strong, and peace generally reigns throughout. A selection of aliens and humans, having defeated the Starflyer, have created a working model galactic society

Brave New Words: The Oxford Dictionary of Science Fiction

Jeff Prucher, Editor • Oxford University Press, 342pp, £17.99 hb

Science fiction, with its clutter of clones and robots and climactic drift, has finally crossed over. A glance at something like 1984 shows how invasive the terminology has been, and a shoal of televisual and cinematic creations have also imprinted themselves on the psyche. Then there is a fannish argot that seems deliberately opaque and which already has several small guides dedicated to it. All in all, the proposition of a dictionary must have looked like a runner.

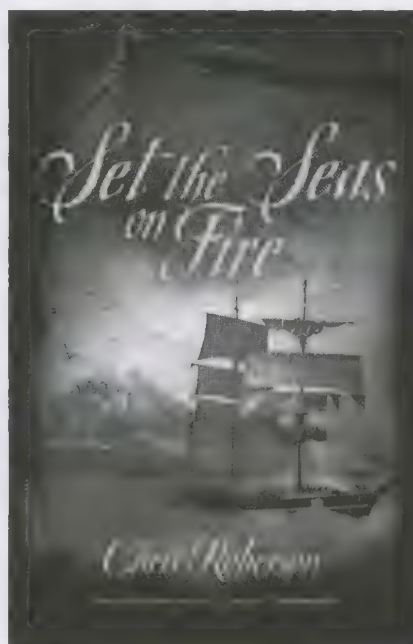
One expects omissions. However, there is one that shouts of the difficulties that have arisen here. Reaching for my default dictionary, the *Oxford Concise English Dictionary*, I read on the jacket that it contains 240,000 words, phrases and definitions. There is no mention anywhere of the size of *Brave New Words*. Is it because a hardback dictionary that contains fewer than nine hundred entries might seem a tad...light? When you notice that around seventy of those definitions start with the prefix 'space', you start to see the scale of the problem. A couple of letters have no entries at all. Prucher has padded out the contents with eleven one-page articles on such seemingly randomly chosen subjects as *Star Trek* and robots, but they feel superfluous.

The fannish language does deserve inclusion, but is it much more than a historical curiosity today? The replacement of the fanzine by the Internet forum has, of necessity, enforced a more transparent form of language. The old ways are dying.

There is also the matter of the more serious language of SF. There is no mention of 'Mundane-SF' here, despite the movement having been around for several years now, but 'Slipstream' is present, and correctly dated back to Bruce Sterling's *SF Eye* article. Curiously, one of the later citations is an *Interzone* review of *Territories*, but *Territories* is not itself cited. Then we turn the page and find that twice as much wordage has been devoted to 'Smeg' and its variants. Some may find this annoying.

The famous anagram origin of 'Ansible' is not mentioned in its entry (it would have been nice to find if it is apocryphal) but there is pleasure to be had in tracing the shared usage of words, even when portmanteau neologisms are meant to be obvious narrative shortcuts. 'Braintape', for example, has a meaning that escapes no one.

So there it is. Fun? Yes. Useful? Certainly. Essential? Sadly, not. **Jim Steel**



Set the Seas on Fire

Chris Roberson • Solaris, 384pp, £9.99 pb

An updated version of a previously published chapbook, *Set the Seas on Fire* is a virtuoso performance that combines the sea-faring story with fantasy set in the Napoleonic era. Roberson quickly sets the scenes with two intertwining stories.

First we are introduced to the young Hieronymous Bonventure, who is ostensibly being taught how to fence – but in the developing acquaintanceship with his tutor, he learns the deeper reasons for his tuition. The main narrative is set in 1808, with the HMS *Fortitude* (on which Bonaventure is Lieutenant) in desperate need of repair after a skirmish with a Spanish galleon. Coming across survivors from the galleon, they hear of an island of terror where the ship is beached. Once ashore, the crew meet the inhabitants, and embark on individual adventures – with Bonaventure getting more out of falling in love than he could ever hope for – before finally descending into Hell.

Roberson combines a sense of period with the strong sense of wonder and fear. Whilst the setting is Napoleonic, the reader is never left with a sense that the period is a backdrop. It oozes onto the page, not just in the warfare and hierarchy, but in the mannerisms and etiquette. At one level he harks back to the 'Fantasy of Manners' school – but at another, the action takes hold and really makes the story special.

Untypically for fantasy, his characters encounter the Other and are overwhelmed by it. The sheer alienness of Pacific native culture to Western minds (long the preoccupation of anthropology) is developed so well that, ultimately, it is both familiar *and* different. Roberson does not try to understand the stories, but he uses them brilliantly to demonstrate the strengths and shortcomings of the main protagonists.

Set the Seas on Fire is a thoughtful but rip-roaring adventure, combining Hornblower and Lovecraft with a subtlety certainly not seen in the 'New Weird' or other naval stories. The other writing of Roberson's that I have read has left me astounded at his control of silences and muted responses amidst terrifying situations, and *Set the Seas on Fire* is certainly in that class. I cannot recommend this book too highly as an intelligent, readable novel. **Iain Emsley**

Set the Seas on Fire is a thoughtful but rip-roaring adventure, combining Hornblower and Lovecraft with a subtlety certainly not seen in the 'New Weird' or other naval stories. I cannot recommend this book too highly

Grave New World: The Decline of the Weird in the Fiction of J.G. Ballard

Dominika Oramus • University of Warsaw Press, ???pp, price unknown, pb

Grave New World presents an ambitious and rich account of Ballard's oeuvre, tracing a handful of themes (apocalyptic social implosion, war phantasmagoria, pathological boredom, the Death Drive, the dialectic between mental and physical landscapes) from *The Wind from Nowhere*, Ballard's 1961, strapped-for-cash brain-fart début, through his early science fiction in its various engagements with New Wave and other avant-garde contexts, his postmodern memoirs, and all the way through the recent paranoid fables up to and including *Kingdom Come* (2006). Not unusually for a book foreshadowed by academic papers, there's a fair amount of repetition, but it's no bad thing – it means you can generally dip in and pick up the thread fairly quickly.

Oramus tries to jigsaw her chosen themes into the underlying and unifying core of Ballard's work. I query not whether she succeeds but why she bothers – whether or not Ballard's work possesses deep invariances, it is certainly superficially various, and any sharp reader will be as interested in the variety as the core. More useful than those monopolising conclusions are the early chapters, which summarise major critical approaches to Ballard's work and supply potted introductions to the theorists who most inform it (Nietzsche, Spengler, Jung, Fukuyama...the list goes on). *Grave New World* might have paid a little more attention, in this section, to the Marxist heritage of several theorists (Debord in particular comes across as Baudrillard's, sort of, *squire*), as well as to the ways their ideas have been received and challenged in recent years. "The represented world seems more real than the world outside of pictures" – this supposed to be like, uh, a newsflash?

In justice, *Grave New World* only wants truck with such theory for what it can illuminate in Ballard's work, but here again the book misses a trick. Ballard is an extraordinary storyteller and poet: as soon as any study of him immures sufficient quotation, this comes clear. Inasmuch as Ballard's work also performs expositions and criticisms of contemporary Western society, it exists in the tension between, on the one hand, accuracy and clarity, and on the other, what makes a good story. Taking it seriously should also mean trying to work out how *true* its ideas are; that means situating them in intellectual traditions in which they are unpopular. **Lara Buckerton**

Mainspring

Jay Lake • Tor, 320pp, \$24.95 hb

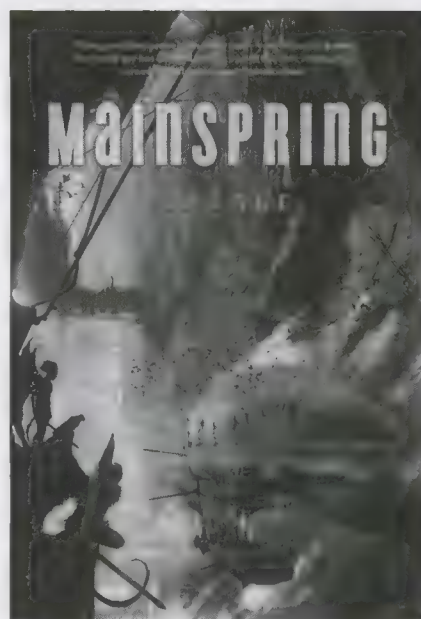
One of the most interesting things happening in American science fiction and fantasy at the moment is the emergence of a new generation of writers through the small presses. In magazines like *Polyphony* and *Leviathan* and Lady Churchill's *Rosebud Wristlet*, and in chapbooks and websites, the same names keep cropping up, building a reputation, getting into Best of the Year anthologies and onto awards shortlists. Jay Lake is one of the leading lights in this circle; prolific both as author and editor, edgy and restless in style, it was only a matter of time before his novels started to appear from a mainstream publishing house. What is surprising, therefore, is how old-fashioned this novel feels. Where we might have expected something challenging, unconventional, maybe a little rough around the edges, what we get is smooth, sleek and familiar.

It's a boy's own adventure story full of exotic locations, swashbuckling action, threats that aren't really too threatening, villains who turn out okay in the end, attacking natives, noble heroes, mysterious orientals and a young hero who comes of

age, wins the girl and completes the quest all at the same time.

What makes it exotic is the steampunk setting. We are in an alternate universe that really does run like clockwork. The sky is crossed by the brass tracks that carry the sun and planets, while the earth itself is divided in two by the gigantic brass teeth of the cogwheel that keeps it on course. Our hero, an apprentice clockmaker in colonial New Haven, (the year is 1900, Victoria is on the throne and America is still part of the empire), finds himself given the unwelcome task of winding up the mainspring of the world because the universe is running down.

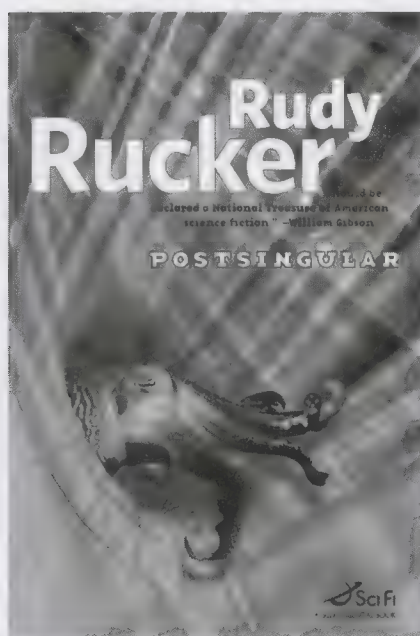
What makes this novel unusual is that young Hethor is given his task by the angel Gabriel. In this orrery writ large, God is manifest in the heavens, and Lake never questions religion or, indeed, uses the clockwork metaphorically to explore the regulation of life in this universe. Rather, Hethor simply accepts his task and sets off to the South Pole by way of a spell in prison, adventures aboard a naval airship, war against flying creatures, a daring crossing of the equatorial cogwheel, true love in the African jungles, and a host of bizarre encounters. Lake keeps the action moving, there is a restless pace to the narrative that you wish sometimes would just slow down



long enough to explore this world. The colour is vivid, at times garish, everything is noble or dastardly or strange, coincidences abound, and God is forever dropping little gold tablets with cryptic messages at the feet of our hero to keep him on track. It is, in other words, high and exotic adventure that keeps you reading, though you are in the end left wondering why it isn't quite as satisfying as it should be. **Paul Kincaid**

Postsingular

Rudy Rucker • Tor, 320pp, \$25.95 pb



When it comes to unique voices in science fiction, few can claim to have quite as distinctive a style as Rudy Rucker. *Postsingular* is packed full of the larger-than-life weirdness that has become his trademark; classic genre tropes and clichés rub shoulders with mathematical theorems and wild technological speculation, delivered in prose that captures the languid vibe and hippie undercurrents of California.

Rucker's novels move fast; within the first thirty pages of *Postsingular*, planet Earth has already been destroyed by semi-sentient nanobots, then restored thanks to the intervention of a Silicon Valley technogeek named Ond and his autistic son Chu. Long since fired from the company that released the nanoswarm, Ond has been working on an alternative system that will network the world without the need to disassemble it to its component atoms in the process, and the 'orphanet' is born.

But Ond's ex-boss, the obsessive genius Jeff Luty, hasn't dropped his dream of Vearth – a simulated planet devoid of dirt

and mortality – and is working hard on a way to override the orphids with a new nanoswarm. It's not long before all manner of characters are pulled into the plot, from scheming politicians and boat-dwelling hipster artists to street-kids boot-strapping their brains with the computational resources the orphidnet has to offer...and the beings from the next reality along.

Rucker is a writer whose work you either love or hate. I'm happy to be in the former camp, but it's easy enough to see how his breezy surrealist style might put some readers off – if nothing else, it's very at odds with the traditional po-faced voice of science fiction. But therein lies its power; Rucker's quick-draw style acts as a sleight-of-hand that allows him to slip some of sf's biggest tropes and ideas beneath the reader's radar, as well as touching some very human character aspects that are often skipped over (or, worse still, rendered tiresome) by the pens of others. *Postsingular* has all the bells and whistles that only a computing professor could provide, but never at the expense of the story. **Paul Raven**

Radio Freefall

Matthew Jarpe • Tor, 320pp, \$24.95 hb



Debut novels now always seem to come with an 'in the tradition of...' tag; while this might be a useful signpost for the reader, there's also the very real danger of disappointment. The publishers of Matthew Jarpe's first novel say it's in 'the tradition of Robert A. Heinlein's *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress*'; that is bound to make any reader conversant with sf think about moon colonies, mischievous AIs and the attempted crushing of a libertarian society by an oppressive Earth-based regime.

And, initially, *Radio Freefall* seems to cover the bases: except that we only get up as far as a low orbital space station called Freefall, the AIs revel mostly in their role as literal *deus ex machina*, and the forces of globalisation are personified in the frankly dull Walter Cheeseman, the monomaniacal founder and CEO of the ubiquitous technology corporation WebCense. Against him Jarpe places the hardly sympathetic Quin Taber, an aggrieved former WebCense employee who is investigating the origins of a sentient AI – the Digital Carnivore – which now inhabits the 'upper level' of the

net. And then there is the tech-genius and old-time guitarist Aqualung, who seems content enough to be swept along by events, but can't always resist making a stand.

Jarpe's prose is extremely readable, even though the wry authorial undertone seems sometimes too close to Aqualung's individual persona – which wouldn't matter quite as much if the other characters around him were not depicted in such broad brushstrokes. Also, Jarpe seems unsure of what he wants the book to be. Near future political and technological extrapolation? Mystery story? (Aqualung's secret identity is ineffectual because we're inside his head from the start.) A rock band's rise and fall? It's all of these, and yet slightly less.

If you're looking for a near future described in Charles Strossian intensity, move on. It's a decent enough read, though, and it at least touches upon some fairly serious ideas along the way. But in both subject and treatment, it's not exactly going to set the internet alight. Or – going by the band's lyrics – the music charts either. **Paul Cockburn**

Splinter

Adam Roberts • Solaris, 240pp, £9.99 pb

Splinter is a re-imagining of a little-known Jules Verne novel *Off on a Comet*. It was originally inspired by Eric Brown and Mike Ashley's 2004 anthology, which invited modern authors to put their own slant on whatever most excited them from Verne's repertoire.

It tells the story of Hector, an art historian who returns from Europe to find that his father, Hector senior, has sold the family home and set himself up as the head of a 'cult' deep in the Mojave Desert. Hector senior has been experiencing visions of the end of the world and has gathered together a group of followers with no more plan than to survive the impending cataclysm.

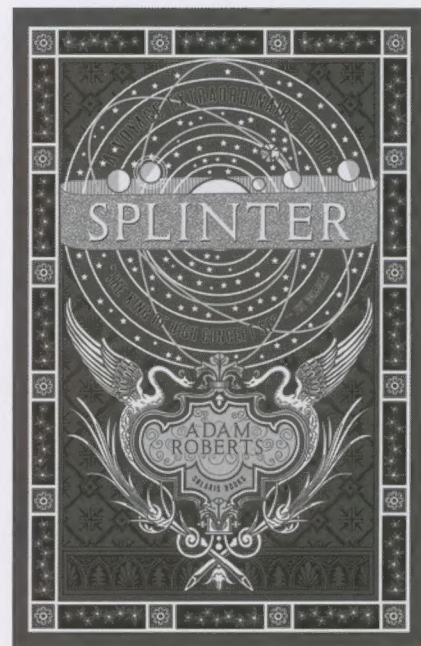
Young Hector carries enough emotional baggage, without having to deal with the fact that his father is most likely unhinged. It doesn't take long before the truth is revealed, however. Before Hector's first night in the commune is through, a mysterious object collides with the Earth, sending the ranch and those on it spinning slowly into the void on the titular splinter of land.

Splinter is not a catastrophe story in the traditional sense. First of all, young Hector doesn't even believe the world as he knows

it has ended. The other characters, primed by his father's prophecies *do* believe, but puzzlingly, don't seem inclined to do anything about it. Instead, they continue as if nothing had happened, carrying out chores and swapping stories at meal times. Young Hector responds to the situation in a similar spirit; smoking cigarettes, mulling over his unresolved conflict with Hector senior and trying to figure out how to get the alluring alpha female Dimmi into the sack.

The focus on the mundane makes the second section of the novel somewhat less than riveting, but that, argues Roberts in the illuminating afterword, is the whole point of the thing. Hector, making the transition into adulthood and independence doesn't even realise that the glory days are at an end. The patterns we learn in our lives endure beyond *the end of things as we know them*. The point is elegantly put, but perhaps at the expense of action and dramatic tension.

The third and final section takes the form of a surreal vision that comes to young Hector. Roberts explains that he went to great lengths to allow *Splinter* to flow unimpeded from his subconscious, a claim that is validated by the closing pages of the book. The abstract ending eschews easy answers. The questions raised enter the reader's own consciousness and hence gain a lifespan that exceeds the fundamental act of reading.



Stylistically, the first part of *Splinter* calls de Lillo and Auster to mind. The writing is crisp, incisive and assured. That successive parts of the book are told in different tenses feels slightly gimmicky, but full marks to Roberts for not playing it safe. On the whole, devotees of literary sf will find much to love here, from the adroit exploration of themes to the unabashed of ingenuity of form. **Peter Loftus**

You've got your computer, and your broadband internet. You might also have a portable mp3 player, possibly even an iPod. And now you want to listen to some podcasts. You could try a podcast directory like the one in the iTunes store, but a quick look will convince you that podcasting is a predominantly American phenomenon. Look closer, however, and you'll find other nationalities represented, and in SF the Brits have a significant presence.

Most SF podcasts are about films and TV. There are a few devoted wholly or partly to written SF, and even fewer that contain written (or read) SF. **Escape Pod** (escapepod.org) is the prime example of a podcast providing actual science fiction short stories, while its younger sister **Pseudopod** (pseudopod.org) does the same for horror short stories. Its forthcoming sibling **PodCastle** (podcastle.org) will provide fantasy.

In long-form SF there are SF novels available as podcasts, notably at **Podiobooks** (poddiobooks.com). Though many of these are excellent, few have been through the traditional print-publishing process. Nevertheless there are several well-known names from SF publishing such as Paul Levinson, Cory Doctorow, James Patrick Kelly and Tracy Hickman.

British SF podcasting can be defined as falling under three categories:

1. Podcasts about SF in general, but produced wholly or partly in the UK, or by Brits, or from a British perspective. An example is **StarShipSofa** (starshipsofa.com) – two guys from the north of England talk at length about SF, concentrating on classic SF novels.

2. Podcasts about British science fiction, but not necessarily produced by Brits, such as **British Invaders** (britishinvaders.com) – a show about British SF TV, or **Doctor Who: Podshock**, both produced jointly from North America and Great Britain.

3. Podcasts about British SF, produced by Brits. An example of this is the **WhoCast**, another show about *Doctor Who*, but produced by a Brit.

These distinctions are arbitrary, and only useful to set limits.

Given the preponderance of film and TV in SF podcasting, it's no surprise that *Doctor Who* and *Harry Potter* constitute a large share of the British SF podosphere. On the *Harry Potter* front there's a wide choice:

PotterCast (pottercast.the-leaky-cauldron.org) • **MuggleCast** (mugglenet.com) • **Wizarding Wireless** (wizardingpod.com) • **Harry Potter Prognostications** (hpprogs.com) • **SpellCast** (spell-cast.com) • **The Secrets of Harry Potter** (sqpn.com) • **Scholastic Harry Potter Podcast** (scholastic.com/harrypotter) • **The Remembrall Live** (theremembrall.mypodcast.com) • **SpinnersCast** (spinnerscast.com) • **Harry Potter Fan Fiction** (harrypotterfanfiction.com)

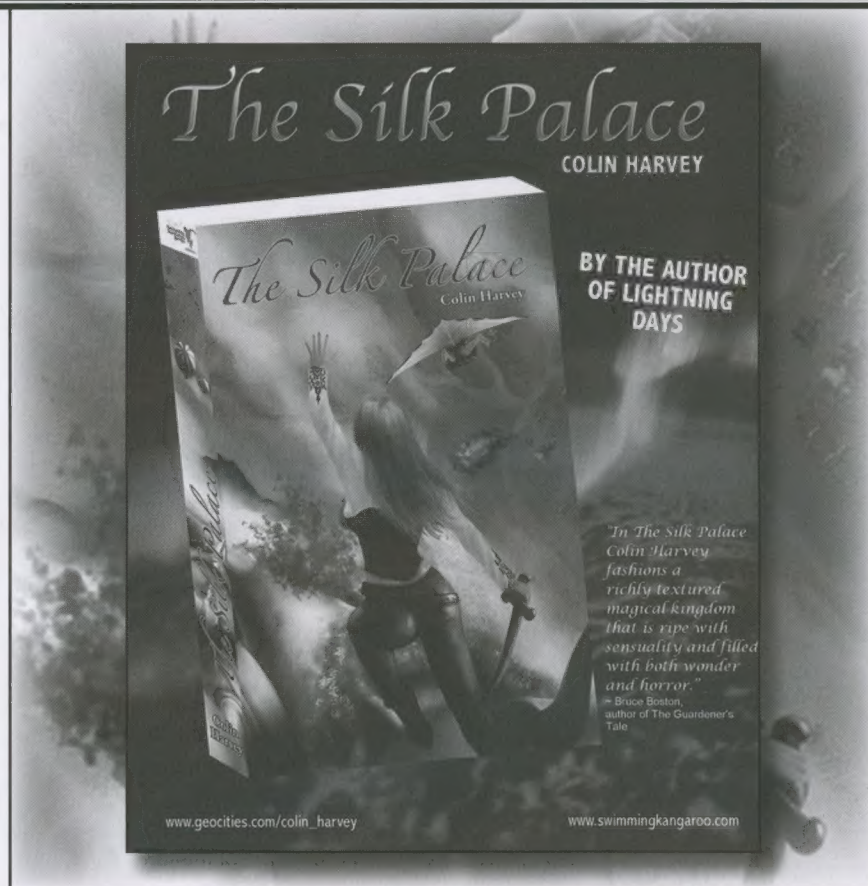
Doctor Who is likewise well covered: **Podshock** (gallifreyanembassy.org) • **WhoCast** (thewhocast.com) • **Time Tales** (doctorwhotimetales.blogspot.com) • **Doctor Who Podcast** (doctorwho.podomatic.com) • **Podcast Who** (podcastwho.com)

An example of a British podcast about non-British media SF is the latest offering from BBC7: **Heroes The Official Radio Show** (bbc.co.uk/drama/heroes/radio), though the first 15-minute episode didn't offer much of substance about the new US TV import currently showing on BBC2. It's yet another example of mainstream

media getting into podcasting, even if in this case it's only a radio show released as a podcast after airing. This doesn't mean that the independents will be ousted, just that listeners will have more choice.

Some podcasters look to traditional media for their content. Old time radio (OTR) is a popular source of material for US podcasts, as the copyright on those old radio shows has expired. In the UK the legal situation is different, with copyright remaining in force until 70 years after the death of the last surviving scriptwriter. Nevertheless some old British radio shows, such as Charles Cilton's radio serial *Journey Into Space*, are made available on Dennis Humphrey's **OTR British Science Fiction** podcast (podango.com).

There's plenty to satisfy listeners who want a British perspective on SF, or specifically want British SF, but shows need to be sought out. The iTunes Store directory is comprehensive but its search facility is poor. For a list of other podcast directories, try Rob Walch's **Directory of Directories** at podcast411.com. **Paul S. Jenkins** (revupreview.co.uk)





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—*Publishers Weekly*, Starred Review

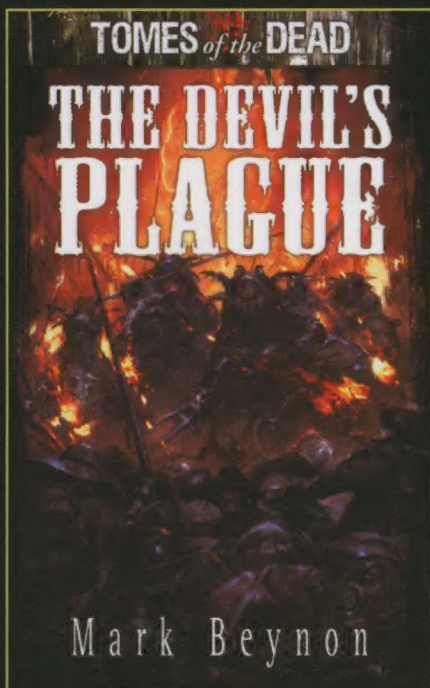
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